THE LONG TRAIL by Cliff Campbe

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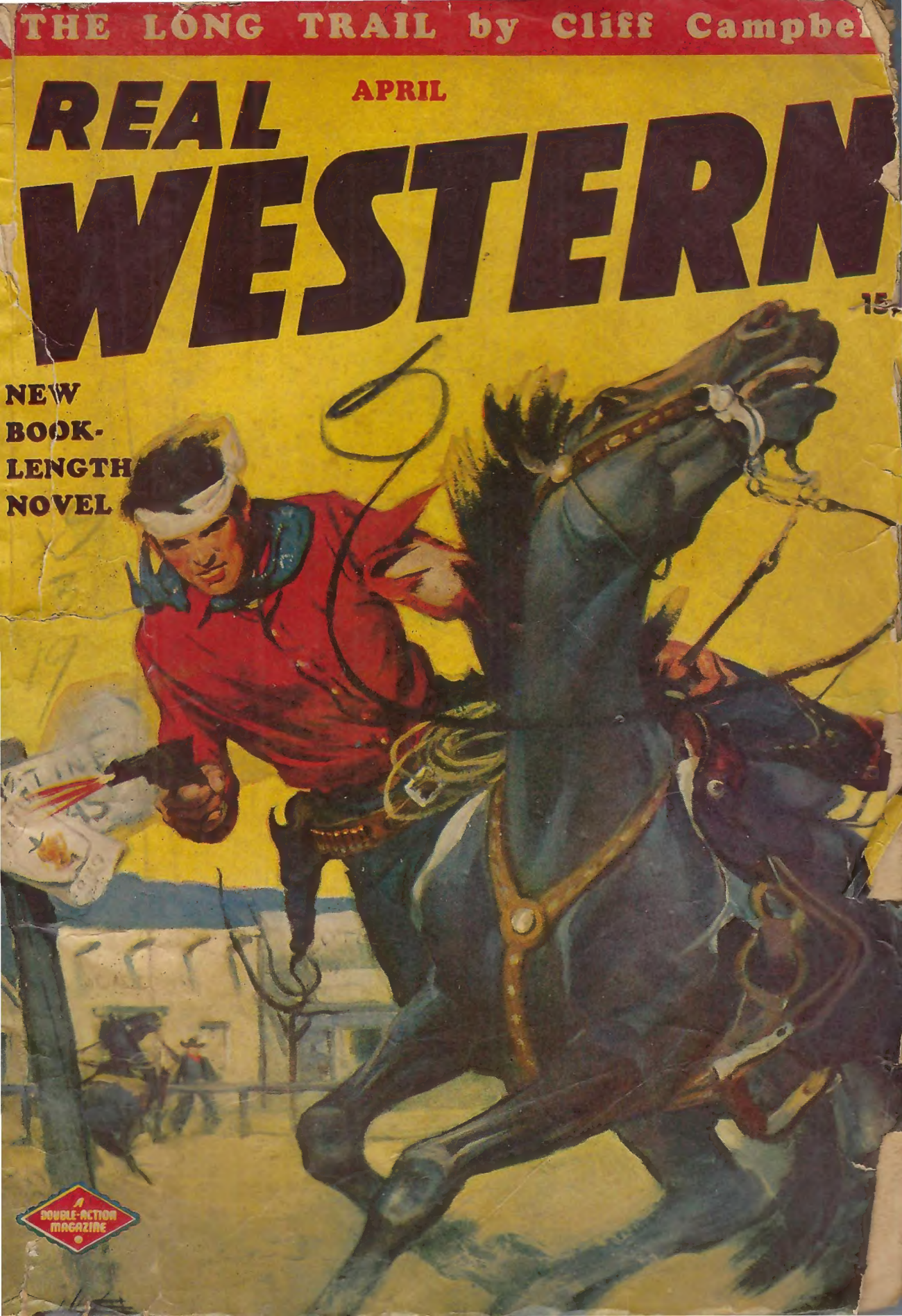

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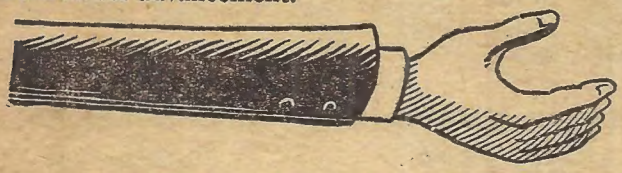

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Volume 13 **April, 1948** **Number 5**

COMPLETE NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

THE LONG TRAIL.....By Cliff Campbell 8

Day after day, accidents and the depredations of renegades depleted the wagon-train, until the survivors began to wonder if anyone would live to see California. And Bill Raines, who did the trouble-shooting for the expedition, not only had to deal with this, but with treachery inside the train as well!

SHORT STORIES

DEATH RIDES THE RIVER.....By Lee Floren 63

Spotted Hawk knew that he might be blamed for the death of old Mack Wilson, but he wouldn't desert his post.

ONE-GUN LAW.....By Clay Starr 72

Jim Ferber had one gun against the fancy twin smokepoles of Malone and his cronies of the wild bunch — and it looked as if Ferber wouldn't last long.

HELL AT STARVATION CAMP *(Fact Article)*..By Harry Van Demark 80

JUAN FLACO'S RIDE.....By John L. Cooney 81

The true story of a ride as dangerous as that of the better-known Paul Revere.

HIGH NOON.....By Chuck Martin 84

"You've killed too many men already, Shando — now stay out of town!"

SIX-SHOOTER INITIATION.....By Mark Lish 91

A more experienced man would have pulled out of the job the kid jumped into!

THE TISHOMINGO BIRD.....By Allan K. Echols 98

Some gents are just like that famous bird that flew backwards, because it didn't care where it was going, but it liked to see where it had been!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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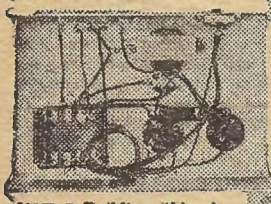

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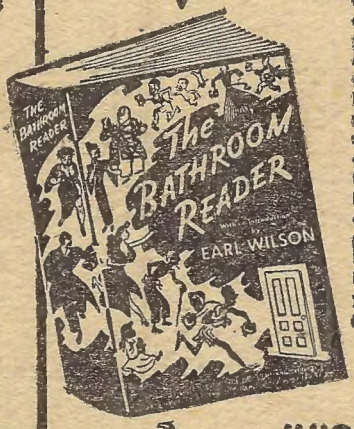
▼ CONTENTS ▼

THE BATHROOM REVOLUTION
SAUCE FOR THE GANDER
YOU WERE PERFECTLY FINE
HAIRCUT
THE FIRESIDE BOOK OF SHAGGY-DOG STORIES
MR. AND MRS. ELLIOTT
I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU
GUN CRAZY
DINNER IN A GOOD RESTAURANT
A GIRL FROM RED LION, PA.
NOW I'LL TELL ONE
O B'S EDITOR AND PAGE-ONE DAMES
A MAN MAY BE DOWN
A FRIEND IN NEED
THE MYSTERY OF THE FABULOUS LAUNDRYMAN
THE BEDCHAMBER MYSTERY
HOW TO INVITE SOMEBODY TO BED
SHOW CASES
A TALK TO YOUNG MEN: GRADUATION ADDRESS ON "THE DECLINE OF SEX"
WHERE THE GIRLS WERE DIFFERENT
MOONLIGHT SONATA
PARADISE MISLAID
BELIEVE IT OR NOT
DISSERTATION ON STRONG DRINK
LOUIS
STORYVILLE
IN AND ABOUT THE BATHROOM
THE MYSTERY OF THE HANSOM CAB

THE BATHROOM READER



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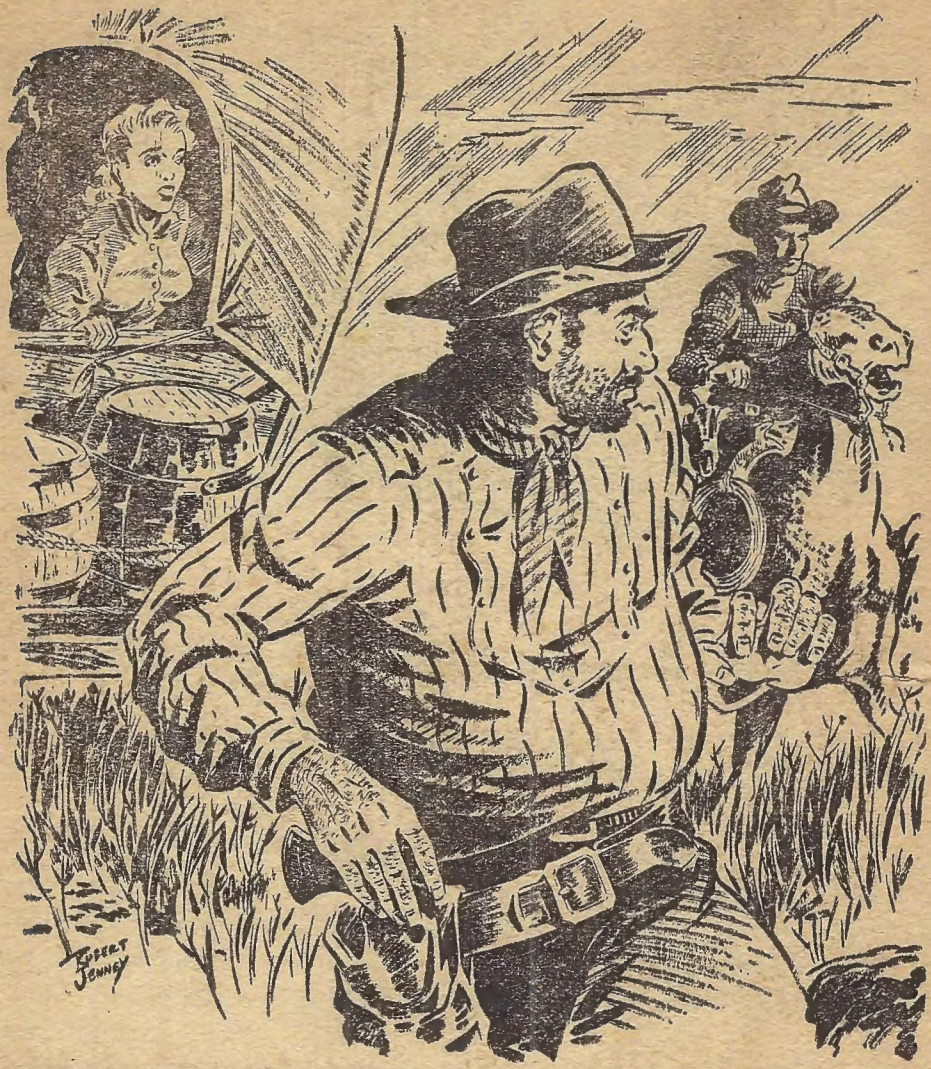
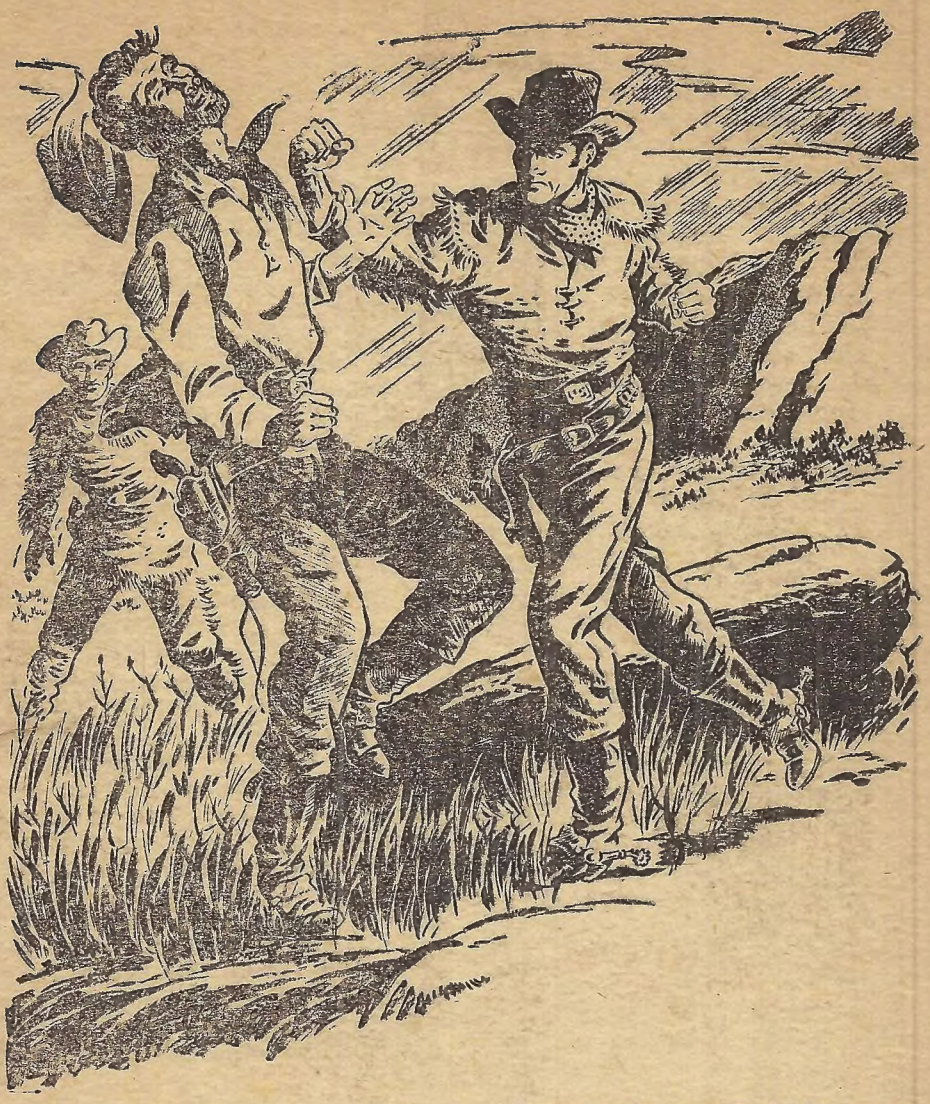


THE LONG TRAIL

Brand New Book-Length Novel

By Cliff Campbell

Bill Raines was a young hombre, but he was old in trail-savvy, and the menace that McBride and his renegades presented to the wagon-trains took every ounce of shrewdness he owned. And in addition, he and Cather had to deal with treachery in their own outfit . . .



1

Wyoming

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon of a long, wearying day in July. Northward, beyond the haze were the Big Horn Mountains; southward, rugged hills that someone had named the Front Range. Between the Big Horn and the Front was a gap, a ten-mile wide expanse of green, hump-backed, open country, the only negotiable east-west passage for wagon trains.

Dust clouds arose and billowed upward into the placid blue sky; the source and cause of the dust was a double line of wagons;—each line at least a quarter of a mile long, and both lumbering along with less than a dozen feet of searing sunlight between them. The train was heading for a grassy slope, the other side of which led downward onto a flat table-land that was the northeasterly corner of Utah.

The train's route skirted the great desert, swung southward along the mythical Utah-Nevada border for

some seven or eight hundred miles; then it cut westward again, directly across Nevada, first to Virginia City, then a bit southwesterly to Carson City, hence into California. There the train would break up with the gold-seekers striking northward through the Yosemite Valley to Sacramento and points further north, and the settlers, the farmers from Ohio and Illinois, turning their heavily-laden farm wagons and top-heavy prairie schooners toward the fertile valleys in the south.

Dust swirled from the huge wagon wheels and the mules' hoofs as the train forged over the plain to the foot of the slope; then the lead wagon mounted the incline. The panting, sweaty mules pulling the wagon dug their hoofs into the side of the slope and the wagon began to crunch upward. A whip snaked out over the mules' heads and cracked with the echoing report of a pistol shot; the canvas-covered schooner lurched drunkenly when one of its front wheels collided with a half-buried rock, climbed over it and came thudding down again. Axles, shaft and harness creaked dismally, and the mules wheezed nasally as they struggled upward.

A couple of horsemen rode up, swung themselves out of their saddles and ran up to the wagon and put their shoulders to it. The wheels turned and the wagon tongue jutted out ahead of the mules and dragged them along. The wagon reached the halfway mark, then the three-quarters point and finally, with the mules' tongues hanging out of their mouths, it came lumbering over the crest and rolled to a stop.

BELOW, A whip cracked and a second wagon started up the slope. A lithe rider astride a nimble-footed horse appeared, jogged up the grassy incline, swerved away from the climbing wagon, and reached the top. He reined in briefly, glanced at the bonneted woman on the wide seat of the halted wagon, and at the man beside her, then he rode away. They followed him with their eyes, saw him stop a couple of hundred feet beyond them, watched him twist around and scan the countryside.

"What's he doing, John?" the woman asked. "Less he's just takin' a look around t' see that everything's all right."

"Dunno," her husband answered. "Oh."

John Andersons shifted the reins in his big hands. He squinted at the youth for a moment.

"Will Cather seems t' think that young feller knows a heap about this part o' the country," he went on shortly. "I sure hope so. Nob'dy else knows where we are. Every mornin' I hafta ask Will if we're still in Wyomin' an' if he thinks we'll ever get t' California. He turns t' that Raines feller an' waits f'r him t' answer me."

"Raines?" Mary Andersons repeated. "Is that his name?" Her husband nodded.

"Yeah. Think his first name's Bill."

The second wagon lumbered to the top of the incline and the Andersons watched it roll past them, and halt a short distance beyond them. A third and fourth climbed the slope; a fifth; then they came rolling up one hard behind the other until there were eleven of them. Raines returned, pulled up near the Andersons' wagon; a big man astride a sweating horse rode up the incline, reined in near Raines.

"How's it look, son?" he asked.

"Awright. How much further you plannin' t' go on f'r t'day?"

Cather glanced skyward.

"We'll stay put here," he answered. "There's a storm coming."

Raines looked up at the sky. Cather smiled.

"You won't find 'ny sign of it up there," he said. He tapped his right leg. "Busted that leg more'n thirty years ago, an' ever since I've been able t' tell what kind o' weather we're gonna have."

He jerked his horse away and clattered over to the waiting wagons.

"All right, folks!" he called. "Foller me!"

The mules stirred reluctantly wa-

gons squeaked into movement, and one by one they rolled away, halted again probably a hundred feet beyond the top of the slope; Cather wheeled away, and rode back, and went down the incline. Raines looked skyward again. There was a black cloud overhead, and Raines shook his head. He rode down the slope, joined Cather who was watching other wagons start upward.

"See it?" Cather asked.

"Y'mean th' cloud?"

'Uh-huh. Hope we get all the wagons up there b'fore it hits."

WAGON AFTER wagon lumbered by, and the lines still awaiting their turn began to lessen. There were six wagons on the slope when the rain burst upon them. It came down suddenly, a pelting, punishing, swirling downpour that turned the grassy incline and the range into a quagmire. A wagon halfway up the slope stopped and rolled downhill when one of its mules lost its footing and fell heavily; there was a scream of terror from a woman when the other mules pulling the wagon became panicky and found themselves being dragged down the slope by the heavy wagon. Shouts and cries and yells added to the confusion and excitement, then a loud agonizing splintering sound indicated that the shaft had snapped off.

Despite the weight of the four slithering mules in the traces, the wagon seemed to gather momentum as it careened down the slope. Those behind it struggled frantically to pull out of its path, a couple of them succeeded, but others found the slippery footing too much for them. Mules scrambled this way and that, and the plunging wagon, swinging around crashed into two others. The three swayed together for a moment like a trio of great bulls or buffaloes with their horns entangled, then two wagons toppled over while the third promptly collided with a fourth wagon and sent it reeling into a fifth. The sixth wagon, turning aside desperately, was side-swiped and it crashed over on its side. A huge wheel rolled down the hill, rolled into a team of mules that was plodding upward; there was a frenzied scream, the pained screech of an injured mule and and the wagon behind the panicky team tottered unsteadily, then the canvas top of it collapsed on the heads of those inside.

Bill Raines caught a fleeting glimpse of a girl's face somewhere among the crush; her face was white and he flung himself out of the saddle and went plunging past a skidding wagon, swerved away from the threshing legs of a downed mule, leaped recklessly for the seat of the wagon beyond the mule. He made it somehow, collided with the girl, ripped the reins out of her hands and pushed her back inside.

By this time other men had taken a hand in the melee; rough but strong hands jerked terror-stricken mules to a stop, and the situation was brought under control. Raines swung around on the seat and peered into the shadowy depths of the wagon. There were pieces of furniture; barrels and boxes; pots and pans, and even bits of clothing strewn about; fortunately the heaviest pieces of furniture hadn't been dislodged. Whoever had stowed them aboard the wagon had wedged them in and they had withstood the jouncing on the slope. Raines noticed too that there was a half-opened blanket roll among the other things.

"Hey," he said. "You c'n come outta there now."

THERE WAS no response. He frowned, dropped down into the wagon and almost stepped on a huddles figure at his feet. It was the white-faced girl. He bent over her quickly, crooked his arm under her head, raised it a bit. Something swung against his back and he turned his head to see what it was; it was a canteen and he could hear water sloshing around in it as it swung back and forth from a nail in the canvas stave. He ripped it off the nail, managed to uncork it with his free hand, and he forced some water into her mouth, prying her lips apart with his thumb; a bit of the water trickled down her chin and onto the tight bod-

ice of her dress. Her eyes fluttered and opened and fixed themselves on his face. He smiled at her and color surged back into her cheeks.

"Awright now?" he asked.

Her eyes shifted a bit, from his sun-bronzed face to his white, even teeth, then up again to meet his eyes.

"I..I think so," she replied somewhat hesitantly. She moved her head a little and the motion made her wince. "My head hurts. I must have bumped it."

"Yeah, guess you did," he said. "I musta pushed you a heap harder'n I realized. Y'see, I was afraid you'd get thrown offa th' seat in all that millin' around an' when I jumped up on th' wagon I had t' do things in a hurry. I'm sorry that I was so rough."

"The chances are I'd have gotten lots worse than a mere bump if you hadn't acted so quickly," she said with a wan smile. "It took a lot of nerve to do what you did."

He reached for the blanket roll, drew it closer, and flipped it open; then he lifted her off the floor and onto the blanket.

"You stay put there f'r now," he commanded. "When we get t' th' top o' th' hill, we'll have a look at your head.Want 'ny more water?"

She noticed then that his shirt and neckerchief were drenched; his hat was, wet, too but he had pushed it back on his head to prevent the water from dripping on her. He nodded toward the canteen.

"No, thank you."

He corked the canteen and slung it up on the nail, got to his feet; when he straightened up he bumped his head on the top curve of the stave. He frowned again, turned and climbed up on the seat. She heard the handbrake screech as he released it. There There was a creaking, crunching sound as the wagon lumbered forward, then it began to hurl uphill. It jounced and thumped and she winced and finally closed her eyes tightly. That was all she remembered until she was startlingly awakened by the feeling that the rain was beating down upon her, she tried to twist away from it but something prevented it. She opened her eyes to see what it was.

She was lying on her side facing the wall of the wagon and her face was barely an inch from the wall. But she was wet—there wasn't any doubt of it—that is her face and her hair and her wrists were wet. She sank down on her back. Then she saw him again. He was kneeling beside her and in his hand was a water-soaked piece of white cloth with which he had been bathing her face and wrists.

"Oh," she said.

"Passed out while we were makin' it up th' hill," he explained. "Feel stronger now?"

"Oh, yes," she said quickly.

"If you're sure you'll be awright f'r a few minutes," he went on, "I'll go see if I c'n rustle up some hot coffee. That oughta fix you up."

A strand of damp hair dropped limply on her cheek and he tucked it back in place very gravely with a big finger.

"May I sit up now, please?"

He considered for a moment, then he shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "You stay put till I get back. I won't be more'n a minute or so."

He tossed the wet cloth up on the seat, then he arose, straightened up forgetfully and promptly bumped his head. His lips tightened. He bent his head, took off his hat and touched his head gingerly.

"We're gonna hafta do somethin' about that," he said. "B'fore I get my brains knocked out." A faint smile of amusement toyed briefly at the corners of her mouth. He put on his hat. "Be right back."

IT WAS five minutes later when he returned.

"Coffee ain't ready yet," he announced as he climbed into the wagon. He produced a flask of whiskey, uncorked it and held it out to her. "Take a swallow o' that."

"No, thank you."

"Go on," he urged. "A little bit of it can't hurt you."

"I'd rather not."

He shrugged his shoulder, corked the flask and returned it to his hip pocket.

"Has the rain stopped?" she asked. "I don't hear it beating on the canvass."

"Stopped a couple o' minutes ago," he answered. "But it did enough damage though while it lasted. Cost us nine or ten mules an' four wagons, scared th' daylights outta half a dozen women, an' some o' th'm just about set t' have babies; an' then, as if that wasn't enough. Will Cather got 'imself banged up."

Her eyes widened.

"Seriously?"

"No," he said. "His horse got tangled up with some mules an' Will got spilled. But he'll be up an' around again by mornin', an' outside o' feelin' a little stiff, he'll prob'bly be chipper'n ever. Right now he's layin' down in the Andersons' wagon with Missus Anderson ridin' herd on him an' refusin' t' let him budge outta there till sun-up."

"Oh," she said, evidently greatly relieved.

"We're gonna hafta take care o' things for Will. Not that there's anything special I gotta do. Just see that everything's under c'ntrol. Think you'll be awright for a while?"

"Of course."

"I had a look at that lump you got on your head," he said. "It's a beauty awright. But I don't think there's anything we can do about it. Chances are th' swelling'll be down by morning anyway." He turned slowly, eyed the stave on which he had bumped his head. "When I get back we'll eat."

After he had gone, she sat up; her head throbbed so, she was quite content to sink down on the blanket. After a while her eyes closed. She did not intend to sleep; however, unwillingly or otherwise, she dozed off only to awake with a start when she heard something fall close by. Raines looked down at her and grinned.

"Hadda drop that danged plate an' spoil things," he said ruefully. "Good thing the bacon was on th' other plate."

She sat up at once.

"U-uh-m," she said. "Bacon. And it smells heavenly."

"Hope it tastes as good," he said. He knelt down, then he sank down beside her in a cross-legged squat, placed a well-filled tin plate of crisp bacon on the floor between them. "We don't need that other plate, th' one I dropped an' kicked aroun', do we?"

"I don't," she answered.

"I know I don't," he said. "O-h, want your coffee now or afterw'rds?"

"Now, please, if it isn't too much trouble."

She laughed suddenly and he raised his eyes.

"S'matter?" he asked.

"We're sitting here so unconventionally, and we don't even know each other," she explained. "What's your name?"

"Bill. Bill Raines."

"Where do you come from?"

"California," he answered.

"What do you do?"

"Haven't been doin' anything much these last two years," he replied. "Before that, I used t' help Pop an' Mom on th' ranch."

"Oh," she said.

"When they died, I kinda lost int'rest in things an' now I'm home wherever I find a place t' bed down."

"That's an awful way to live, isn't it?"

"It's lousy," he said simply. "How come you're makin' this trip alone?"

"There wasn't anyone else to make it with," she said evenly.

"Y'mean...."

"I haven't a family either."

"That's tough. A heap tougher on a girl th'n on a man. What are you gonna do when you get t' California?"

"Work," she said simply.

"Where?"

"Wherever I can get a job. There must be...."

There was a sudden clatter of hoofs and a horseman jerked to a stop beside the wagon, stood up in his stirrups and peered in.

"Hey, Raines," he called. "You in there?"

The tall youth put down his cup,

got to his feet and leaned over the seat.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"We're gettin' company," the man said. "Six men are ridin' this way. Someb'dy said you're in charge while Cather's laid up, so I figgered you'd wanna know."

Raines swung himself over the seat, jumped down to the ground. There was a swift clatter of hoofs and a band of men, six in number, came riding up. When Raines stepped forward to meet them, they drew rein. A single man, a burly fellow, edged his mount up to the wagon, then he stopped, eased himself in the saddle. He pushed his hat up from his eyes.

"Howdy," he said. He looked at Raines, then at the man beside him. "Where'll I find th' head man?"

"He ain't around," Raines answered. "Somethin' I c'n do for you?"

"Dunno. We know this country an' we kinda figgered we could come in handy guidin' you folks."

"I'm doin' that."

The big man smiled.

"I mean t' California. Look, sonny, we'll just make ourselves comf'table till your boss shows up an' then we'll put it up t' him. Where's th' chow wagon?"

"There ain't 'ny."

The man frowned. He twisted in his saddle.

"Get down, boys," he called. "We're stayin'."

He swung himself off his horse, hitched up his belt, stopped suddenly, then a smile flashed over his mouth.

"We-ll, what d'you know?" He turned suddenly. "Hey, Pete! Looks like my luck's still holdin' out. Take a look at what's waitin' f'r Poppa up in that wagon!"

One of the horsemen, a leathery-faced man with a low slung Colt thumping against his right thigh, laughed and trudged forward. The burly man laughed too, hitched up his belt again, stepped up to the wagon, put his foot on the hub of the wheel and reached for the seat to pull himself up on the wagon. Raines caught him by the arm.

"Stay outta there," he said coldly.

The man stopped and looked at him, then he jerked his arm away and swung. Raines' movement was so swift, it was almost incredible. There was an echoing crack, the impact of a fist against bone, and the man fell against the mules. He slid away from them and went down on his hands and knees. Slowly he raised his head, sank lower in a crouch, then he came leaping up with a roar, like an enraged bull. The girl, peering down with wide eyes, saw Raines lash out at him. There was a flurry of punches, the sickening thud as they landed, and she turned her head away.

"Get up," she heard Raines command and she looked down again quickly. The big man lay on his face. The leathery-faced man had halted a bare ten feet away, his thumbs hooked in his belt. There was a curious half-smile on his face.

The sprawled-out man stirred, forced himself up on his elbows. There was a sudden rush of booted feet and a dozen rifle-armed men came pounding up to the wagon.

"What'n hell's goin' on here?" a man's voice demanded. It was Will Cather. He gestured with a big black Colt. He glared at the leathery-faced man. "Who're you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you!"

Raines moved away from the man on the ground.

"His names' Lopat," he said. "He's a hired gun thrower. He's wanted f'r murder in practically every county b'tween here an' Kansas."

"H'm," Cather grunted.

"That maverick," Raines continued with a nod in the direction of the big man who was standing now on wide-spread, unsteady legs. "His name's McBride. He's supposed t' be a real tough hombre. Specializes in robbin' small wagon trains. The Oklahoma lawmen'd sure like t' get their hands on his neck. They'd wring it for 'im good."

Cather raised his gun.

"Awright, you skunks" he commanded. "Get back on your horses an' get goin'. An' if either o' you an' I'm includin' th' others with you in this ever come within' shootin' distance o' this train, we'll go after you an' give you what's comin' to you. Remember that. Now get th' hell outta here."

The man named McBride hitched up his belt. Everyone looked at him. There was a red, angry welt on his jaw and blood bubbles in his nostrils. He plodded past them to his horse. Lopat turned slowly, then he strode back to his horse, vaulted up into the saddle. McBride rode away, jogged past his companions who wheeled their mounts and clattered away after him.

Lopat wheeled his horse, stopped him, looked back over his shoulder.. he caught Raines' eye and he smiled at him.

"Be seein' you," he called significantly.

Will Cather bristled.

"G'wan, you skunk," he yelled. "Get outta here b'fore I give you...."

"Don't pay 'ny attention t' him," Raines said.

Lopat laughed, spurred his horse and rode away.

Cather, his gun half raised glared after him; when the gunman disappeared, he shoved his Colt into the waistband of his pants.

"Awright, men," he said, turning to them. "It's all over. Go back t' your wagons and to your womenfolks. They're probably stewin' and a-frettin' so hustle back an' relieve their minds."

The men dispersed.

Cather looked at Raines.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Well what?"

"Think you c'n keep peaceable f'r a spell if I go back an' lay down?"

"I'll try but I can't give you a guarantee."

Cather's eyes twinkled. He patted the tall youth on the back.

"See you in th' mornin', son," he said.

He turned and tramped away. Raines climbed up into the wagon. The girl was sitting quietly on the blanket. He sat down facing her, cross-legged as before. He reached for the coffee pot, hefted it, stopped and looked at her.

"What'd you say your name was?" he asked.

"I didn't."

"O-h, yeah. We were leadin' up to it when we were interrupted," he said. "What's th' matter? Th' way you're lookin' at me, did I do somethin' I shouldn'ta?"

She shook her head.

"No," she replied. "I was simply comparing you with other men I've met and known."

"An' I ain't like any o'them, is that it?"

"Yes."

"I see," he said gravely. "Rather have me more like them?"

She considered for a moment.

"No," she said. "I think I'd rather have you just as you are."

He smiled boyishly.

"Thanks," he said. "Awright f'r me t' tell you that I've been doin' some o' that same comparin'?"

"W-hy, yes. Of course."

"You're a heap nicer'n anybody I've ever met. Now f'r Pete's sake, what do folks call you?"

She laughed softly, gently, musically.

"You've sure got th' nicest way o' laughin'," he said.

"Thank you. My name's Margaret, Margaret Taylor. Everyone calls me Peggy."

"Peggy, huh?" He filled his cup.

"Don't you like it?"

"Huh? O-h, sure. It's swell," he said. He put down the pot, looked at her for a long moment, then his lips whipped back in a grin. "If you ever sass me, y'know what I'm gonna call you?"

"What?"

"Maggie! C'mon, lemme have your cup."

2

Night Unto Day

THE KURT Heydrich family occupied two wagons in the very middle of the train. Kurt, a big, heavy man who was slow of speech and deliberate of movement, drove the first Heydrich wagon; his wife, Anna, who was blonde and buxom and who wore her braided hair wound around her head, drove the second wagon. The Heydrichs were farmers, originally from German Saxony, and more recently from Illinois. Kurt was the stolid, phlegmatic type, expressionless and totally unimaginative; Anna was just the opposite. She laughed and sang a great deal, but despite her gaiety, she was smart and shrewd and far-seeing. The Heydrich's daughter, Katrina, was blonde like her mother, then unlike Anna, she was supple and graceful. Katrina rode in the second wagon with Anna.

It was early the next morning and Katrina was dressing behind the drop curtain. Anna had just finished jockeying the mules into the traces when Bill Raines rode slowly down the line of awakening wagons. Anna looked up and smiled and Bill gravely touched the brim of his hat as he jogged past. Anna followed him with appraising eyes. Kurt trudged up.

"Kurt," Anna said as he came closer. "Kurt, I think Katrina should know that young man."

"Which young man?"

Anna looked annoyed. Her strong hands gripped Kurt's arms and she turned him around.

"That young man," she said. "The one on the horse."

"Oh," Kurt said. "His name is Raines."

"So what?"

"Nothing," Kurt said. "But why should Katrina know him?"

"Because he is the kind of young man Katrina should marry," Anna said simply.

Kurt looked at her oddly.

"You can tell that just by looking at him?"

"A woman can tell a lot by looking at a man."

Kurt shrugged his shoulder.

"I want you should stop him when he rides back," Anna went on.

"And then?"

"Never mind 'and then'. I will talk to him."

"But what will you talk to him about?"

"I will think of something."

It didn't make sense to Kurt and the expression on his face showed it.

"If you wish it, Anna, all right. I will do it. But I do not like this kind of business. Besides, maybe he is already married. What then?"

Anna shook her head.

"He is not married," she stated with finality.

"You can tell that, too, by just looking at him?"

"No. I asked Will Cather and he told me."

"Oh," Kurt said. "What do you think Katrina would say about this business?"

"What could she say?"

"I am asking you that," Kurt said. "You know, Anna, sometimes you are a very strange woman. Sometimes I do not understand you."

"If you were a mother and you had a daughter who was already nineteen years old, you would understand everything."

"But since I am only the father..."

"Only the father?" Anna echoed. "A father is very important."

"I am very glad," Kurt said dryly.

"Only a father is a man and what can a daughter expect of him? O-oh, I know. You have been a good father to Katrina. She had never wanted for anything. But that is not enough for a girl. She looks to her mother for the important things, the things a man does not understand."

"What is more important than a good home, good food to eat, good clothes to wear?"

"You see, Kurt, you do not understand."

"So?"

"So nothing."

"Tell me," Kurt began again. "What is to be about Karl Linder? I always thought that someday Katrina and he would...."

"Karl is in Illinois," Anna said. "And this is Wyoming, and soon we will be in California."

"So?"

"Katrina will probably never see him again. And maybe that is a good thing."

Kurt looked surprised.

"But I thought you liked Karl."

"Karl is a very nice young man, but he is not for our daughter. If we were still in Germany, maybe I would say 'yes'. In America, no. Karl does not like it here. He does not like Americans or American ways. We do. So does Katrina."

"So?"

"So the young man Katrina marries must be an American, and that young man, that Raines, he is an American. That is why I want Katrina should meet him."

Kurt made no comment.

"Quick," Anna said suddenly. "He is coming."

SHE TURNED away from him to the idling mules, started to hitch them to the shafts. Kurt stepped out as Raines jogged up.

"Good morning," Kurt said politely.

"G'morning," Bill responded.

Kurt shot a quick glance over his shoulder at Anna; in that moment Raines had ridden past. Anna wheeled like a flash.

"Mister Raines," she called.

Bill jerked his mount to a stop. He twisted around and looked back. Anna smiled at him. He looked at her for a moment, then he wheeled his horse and rode back.

"Did you call me, Ma'm?" he asked.

Kurt looked quickly at Anna, wondering what she was going to say.

"Yes," she said, still smiling. Her calmness amazed Kurt. "When you rode by just now, I almost thought you were my brother." Kurt swallowed hard. "He is so much like you, tall and young and handsome; just like you."

Raines grinned boyishly.

"Aw, now."

"My brother's name is Fritz," Anna added. "In America it would be Fred, no?"

"Yeah, I guess it would."

There was a dimple in Anna's round cheek; the dimple always appeared when she smiled deeply, There was coyness in the way she cocked her head to one side and looked up at him.

"Perhaps you will have breakfast with us?" she asked.

"That's mighty nice o' you, Missus...."

"Heydrich," Anna said gently.

Kurt's eyes shifted from one to the other.

"Missus Heydrich," Bill said. "But the fact is, Ma'm, I've got a heap o' things t' do before I c'n even think o' breakfast. But it was swell o' you t' ask me, and I sure appreciate it."

He wheeled his horse. The canvas drop was suddenly whipped back an a girl appeared in front of it, Raines' horse stopped in its tracks. Anna, watching him, saw the tall youth's eyes widen; satisfied, Anna turned and looked at her daughter. Katrina had never shown to better advantage. The bright morning sun made her hair look golden, and her eyes had never been more blue; her full, rounded cheeks were flushed and when her eyes fell with maidenly modesty before Raines', Anna smiled approvingly.

"This is my daughter, Katrina," Anna said. "Katrina, this is Mr. Raines."

"Just make it Bill, Ma'm," Raines said.

Quite properly there was no actual reply from Katrina; nothing but a shy looking-up, a quick, fleeting shy smile, then another maidenly blush. Anna was quite pleased with her daughter.

"Katrina," Anna began.

"Mama, please," a voice that was Anna's yet twenty years younger said. "Katey, Mama. Remember?"

Anna laughed lightly.

"Ach, I am ashamed that I always forget. Katey, maybe if you would ask Mr. Raines maybe he would stay and have breakfast with us. Y-es?"

"Mama, Mr. Raines...."

"Bill," Raines said.

The girl raised her head and smiled.

"Bill," she said, looking at him, then she looked at Anna. "Bill has

told you already that he can't stay. We must not press him and embarrass him, you know."

"Thanks," Bill said. "But look—does that invite hold good for some other time, too?"

"Of course."

"Swell. I'll remember it."

Bill touched his hat gravely, nudged his horse with his knees and rode away. Anna and Katey followed him with their eyes—when he swung in between a couple of wagons far up the line, Anna turned to her daughter and smiled.

"He is nice; no?"

"Very nice, Mama."

"So he is nice," Kurt said. "Good, Now maybe we could have some breakfast? Yes?"

THE TRAIN did not move that day.

At nine o'clock that morning the first of the new babies was born. The second one appeared probably an hour later, and the third kicked its way into the world at noon. There was a great deal of grim-faced scurrying about by the other women in the train who knew exactly what to do; their husbands lounged around patiently and understandingly at first; when the time began to drag by, they began to get restless and impatient. When word was passed around that one of the new mothers, a Mrs. Archer, was very ill, and that it might be necessary for the train to lay over for a couple of days, some of the more impatient men looked annoyed. The farmers in the party seemed to be more patient than the others; and they seemed to understand the need for rest and quiet for the new mothers. They accepted the situation with a shrug that meant that they hoped the layover wouldn't be too long.

Loud-voiced protests were raised by a group of gold hunters, who, as soon as they learned of what they considered an unscheduled halt and therefore an unnecessary one, staged an impromptu meeting that resulted in the formation of a three-man committee that was instructed to see Cather at once and demand that the train go on without further delay. Headed by a lean, sour-faced man named Hammond, the trio went striding up the line to the Andersons' wagon and clamored for Cather to come out. After a few minutes' wait, Cather appeared. The other people in the train pushed forward in order to hear the discussion. Cather listened to Hammond for about a minute, then he stopped him abruptly.

"You've said just about enough, Hammond," Cather's voice boomed angrily. "Any man who'd be skunk enough t' suggest that we leave a couple o' sick women behind an' push on so's you an' your friends c'n get t' Sacramento pronto, is low-down, mis'rable so-and-so an' that's you, by gawd! We ain't stirrin' a step away fr'm here till all our women folks are able t' travel. That's final, Mister Hammond, so you an' your friends pull your wagons outta this train an' get outta here. And th' sooner we're rid o' th' likes o' you, th' better off we'll be!"

That was the end of the discussion. Hammond and his companions started away; they stopped when Hammond spotted Bill Raines and halted in front of him.

"If you c'n use a hundred bucks cash," Hammond said, "we c'n use a guide. You interested?"

Raines shook his head.

"Hundred an' a quarter then," Hammond said curtly. "That's th' highest we'll go, so you'll hafta take it or leave it."

"I'm leavin' it."

"Awright," Hammond said. "Th' hell with it. Chances are we'll do just as well by ourselves."

"Sure," Bill said easily. "An' save that hundred an' a quarter t' boot."

Hammond frowned and swung away; his companions darted after him, overtook him and ranged themselves on either side of him. They pushed their way through the crowd, shouldering people out of their way.

"Hey!" a man yelled. "What d'we do?"

"What d'you think we do?" Hammond retorted. "We're pushin' on, that's what!"

THERE was a bit of whooping and a hurried, excited scrambling

about. Heads turned and eyes watched interestedly as Hammond's followers scurried about, boosted their families up into their wagons and leaped up on the seats, ready to pull out the minute Hammond gave the word. Raines had turned too and now, his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt, he was watching as the gold hunters poised themselves, reins gripped tightly in the left hand, and the right hand curled around the brake handle. Toward the rear of the crowd was a handful of women; Anna and Katey were among them, and somewhat behind them was Peggy Taylor. When Raines smiled. Anna waved in response and nudged her daughter.

"He is smiling at us, Katrina," she said out of the corner of her mouth. "See?"

"What, Mama? O-h, Mr. Raines!"

"Smile back at him?"

When Katey seemed to hesitate, Anna pushed her forward; when Raines started toward them, Anna's arm shot out. She caught Katey by the arm and jerked her to a stop.

"Wait," Anna commanded in a low voice. "He is coming."

Raines was within a dozen feet of the Heydrichs when he swerved and suddenly halted.

"Peggy!" he called and the Heydrichs' smiles vanished, their heads turned as one and their eyes focused on a slim girl who acknowledged Bill's call with an understanding nod, then she backed out of the crowd and circled it. Anna and Katey saw her come up to Raines and smile up at him; their lips seemed to tighten just the barest bit when Raines took her by the arm and led her away.

"That girl," Anna said presently. "You—you know who she is?"

"I think I've seen her before," Katey answered. "I don't know her name though."

"I will find out who she is," Anna said. "Then we will meet her."

"What good will that do?"

Anna was herself again. She smiled deeply.

"You will see," she said. "Come. We must go back now. Papa will be wondering where we are."

A WHIP cracked suddenly with an explosive report and everyone stopped and looked up. A big wagon came lumbering forward. It was Hammond's. He was poised on the driver's seat with a long whip clutched in his right hand. Now other wagons pulled out of line; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight! Slowly they swung in behind Hammond's wagons, forming a line of their own. Big wheels churned the dirt and dust began to rise. Bill Raines and Peggy Taylor had stopped to watch too. Slowly the nine wagons trundled along the line of idling wagons; presently Hammond's was clear of the Andersons' wagon and turning westward. The other wagons followed.

Will Cather had jumped down from the Andersons' wagon; he stood stiffly in front of it, followed the departing wagons with angry eyes; after they had gone, he turned and faced the people who were standing around.

"Now look, you folks," he began and men and women crowded around him. "If there's anybody else aroun' who figgers he's losin' dough by havin' to lay over f'r a couple days, th' thing for him t' do is to harness up an' get goin' while th' goin's still good. There ain't 'ny law, y'know, that says you've gotta stay here if you don't want to."

No one moved.

Cather grunted.

"Awright then," he continued. "Mrs. Archer, I'm told, is in a pretty bad way. Just how bad, I don't know. I ain't a doctor. I'm on'y a man. But you women folks, 'specially th' ones who've had kids, you oughta be able t' understand how sick a woman c'n be at a time like this better'n I c'n ever hope to tell you. So I ain't gonna try. I think this layover is just about th' best thing that could've happened to us. I mean it. I think we c'n all use a layoff. I know danged well th' mules c'n stand a rest if th' rest of us don't think we need it. Awright. You fellers who can't set down, give your wagons a lookin' over, tightenin' up and fixin' whatever needs it. Then once we get rollin' again, everything'll be just so an' maybe we c'n really make time."

THE DAY passed and finally it was evening.

There was no change in Mrs. Archer's condition; the women didn't expect any that soon and insisted there wouldn't be any until morning. Some of them insisted it would be two or three days before anyone would really know. The men didn't argue; there wasn't any argument any of them could advance and for once the word of the women was accepted as final.

Camp fires sprang up and lanterns gleamed all along the line of wagons, and soon the appetizing aroma of cooking filled the air. Supper was barely over when night came on.

Bill Raines and Peggy Taylor had had an early supper. Now they were sitting in silence on the blanket-covered seat of Peggy's wagon. Bill's eyes ranged skyward and Peggy watched him; a couple of times he stood up and looked westward.

"What is it, Bill?" she asked finally.

"Huh? O-h, nothing."

There was another period of silence.

"You're unusally quiet tonight," Peggy remarked. "Are you worried about anything?"

"Just wonderin' how Hammond's bunch is doing," he replied. "They've got women an' kids with th'm, y'know, an' I'd sure hate t' think o' them runnin' into somethin' they mightn't be able t' handle."

"Oh," Peggy said. "You mean like McBride?"

He nodded mutely.

"I thought you said McBride wouldn't dare come near us again."

"Hammond's outfit isn't part o' ours any longer," Bill pointed out.

"Oh," Peggy said again.

He got to his feet, hitched up his pants and shifted his gun belt.

"Look," he said, "It's late an' it's beginnin' to blow up. Suppose you turn in? I'm gonna go and see Cather."

"And then?"

"Y'mean after I see him?"

"Yes."

"O-h, I dunno. Maybe I'll kinda ride out a ways an' have a look around."

She didn't say anything further; she simply looked at him. When he looked at her, she turned her head; he put a big finger under her chin and turned her head around.

"If you're worryin' that somethin's liable t' happen t' me, don't. I ain't lookin' f'r trouble, b'lieve me."

"We-ll," she said and stopped.

"Well what?"

"Nothing. Good night, Bill."

"G'night," he said but he did not move. Neither did she. Then he bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips. "You go t' sleep. When I get back I'll curl up under here same's I did last night. Awright?"

"Hey," a voice called suddenly. "That you up there, Bill?"

Raines wheeled and looked down.

"O-h, h'llo, Will. I was just gonna look you up. Anything th' matter?"

Cather halted and leaned against the big wheel.

"Evenin', Miss Taylor," he said. "Bill, I've been wonderin' if it mightn't be a good idea if one uv us was to take a half o' dozen men an' ride out a ways just t' see that everything's awright. It ain't that I've got any particular love f'r that Hammond feller or that I care a hoot what happens to 'im. It's—"

"I know, Will. It's th' women an' kids with 'im."

"Right."

"I'll go," Raines said. "I c'n do with some exercise."

"You're sure you don't mind goin'? Miss Taylor, you don't—"

"She's turnin' in," Raines said.

"O-h," Cather said. "Then it's awright. Bill, if you mosey down th' line you'll find all th' men you c'n use just hangin' around an' waitin' f'r somethin' t' do."

Raines jumped down and strode away into the darkness.

"Bill!" Cather called.

"Yeah?"

"I'll wait up till you get back. I'll wanna know if anything's happened. An' one thing more."

"What?"

"Watch y'self. Y'hear?"

3

Blood, Sweat and Tears

SOON IT would be dawn. Peggy looked up the line where the Andersons' wagon stood alone. She wondered if Cather was in there, asleep, or if he was up and around waiting as he had promised for Bill to return.

"Good morning," she heard a voice say and she turned around quickly.

A rather plump woman, blonde, blue-eyed and smiling, had just come around the wagon.

"Oh!" Peggy said. She looked a bit startled.

"I hope I did not frighten you."

"Only for the minute."

The woman smiled again.

"I am Anna Heydrich," she said. "We are neighbors. We should know each other; no?"

"Yes, of course."

"Perhaps you know my daughter, Katrina?" Anna asked, then she laughed softly and shook her head. "She does not like it when I call her that. She says I must call her Katey. It—it is more American."

Peggy smiled.

"And my husband, Kurt? You do not know him either?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Heydrich."

"Then I will introduce you. You will like them. Everybody does. Specially Katrina. She is so pretty. You should ask that tall young man—what is his name? O-h, yes, Raines. Mr. Raines, I mean. He could not take his eyes off Katrina."

Peggy offered no comment.

"It was the first time he had seen her," Anna went on, "and he looked—o-h, how do you call it in English?"

"Enchanted?"

"Enchanted, yes," Anna said quickly. "When we lived in Illinois it was the same thing. Every young man there had eyes only for my Katrina. The other girls did not like it but what can you do when a girl is so pretty? But enough about Katrina for now. You are a nice looking girl. Your color—it is not very good. Perhaps you do not eat enough meat or drink enough milk, yes? What is your name?"

"Peggy. Peggy Taylor."

"Peggy Taylor," Anna repeated. "Peggy Taylor. I like it. It is a very nice name."

"Thank you."

"Your family—they are already in California and now you go to join them there?"

"I haven't any family."

Anna looked shocked.

"Oh," she said. "I am sorry to hear that. For a man to be alone, we-ll, it is bad, but a man can manage. For a girl," Anna shook her head, "it is not good."

There was a moment's silence; it was Anna who broke it.

"What will you do when you get to California?" she asked.

"Work."

"Yes, but where?"

"Wherever I can get it."

"H'm," Anna said thoughtfully, then she smiled. "How would you like to live with us?"

"Wh-y, I—"

"We will buy a farm and you could live with us. We are a very happy family, and with us you would be one of us. Of course I know you would not want to live with us for nothing, so you could help me around the house. Not like a servant, like a daughter. You would have a home, a family, everything. You would like that, no?"

"You're awf'lly kind, Mrs. Heydrich, and I want you to know I appreciate it, but I—"

Anna's smile had gone—her eyes were icy cold.

"You are too good, maybe, for such work?"

"I didn't say that."

"You think perhaps this Raines will marry you, and that then you will be a fine lady and you will not have to work?"

PEGGY stiffened. She turned away but Anna hadn't finished with her; she caught Peggy by the arm and spun her around.

"You think a man like him will marry you, a nobody, when there is Katrina who has so much to offer him?"

"Mrs. Heydrich," Peggy said evenly. "I don't think I like you. In fact, I know I don't. Now suppose you take your hand off my arm?"

Anna smiled coldly.

"I think I should tell you, Peggy Taylor, that I have decided that Mr. Raines will marry my daughter," she said. "I will not like it if you should interfere. Because I want we should be friends, I am warning you, so if you are a smart girl you will not encourage Mr. Raines in his attentions to you. Now we understand each other, no, Peggy?"

Peggy pulled away. She whirled around, stopped abruptly when a tall figure appeared before her. She raised her eyes to meet Raines'.

"Well, well, the lucky man!" she cried.

Raines looked sharply at her, shifted his eyes momentarily to Anna Heydrich, then back to Peggy.

"It isn't every man who can be so lucky," Peggy went on sarcastically. "It isn't every man who can acquire two charming women like Mama Heydrich and her beautiful daughter just by marrying the daughter. You're to be congratulated, Mr. Raines. I hope you'll be very, very happy."

Bill frowned. He pushed his hat back from his eyes, hooked his thumbs in his gun belt.

"Wait a minute," he said curtly.

"You're angry, aren't you?" Peggy asked. She shook her head sadly. "You didn't want me to know, did you? O-h, I'm so sorry, Bill. I should have pretended I didn't know anything about your romance with beautiful Katrina, I mean Katey. But Mama Heydrich didn't tell me I wasn't supposed to know. But don't feel too badly, Bill. Mama and Katey will make it up to you, Mama particularly. You'll be surprised at the things she can do, that is when you really get to know her."

"Lemme know when you get finished," Raines said.

"I'm finished now!" Peggy cried. "I never want to see you again!"

She flashed past him, climbed swiftly into the wagon. The canvas curtain thumped down behind her.

It was evening when Peggy emerged from her wagon. The air was brisk and cool and the sky was blue and starry. She heard a boot crunch shale and pebbles and she looked away quickly.

"Peggy," she heard Raines say.

She did not answer.

"Peggy," he said a second time.

"Go away."

"You have 'ny supper?"

"I don't want any."

"Climb down here," he commanded.

"Come on."

"No."

"Do I hafta come up there an' get you?"

There was no reply, and no movement on Peggy's part.

"LOOK," Raines said quietly. "I haven't got time f'r playin' t'night. McBride's outfit shot up Hammond's bunch an' we're liable t' get it t'night. I've arranged f'r you t' move in with Mrs. Anderson. It'll be better that way all around, safer an' it'll mean comp'ny f'r you, too, specially at night when Cather an' Anderson an' me are on th' go. Mrs. Anderson's got s'me supper waitin' f'r you so we don't wanna keep 'er waiting. Besides, I've got things t' do. So come on. Climb down here."

She turned slowly, finally raised her eyes to his.

"We-ll," she began.

"Come on."

She got to her feet.

"The women and children with Hammond," she said. "Were they all right when you found them?"

"Some o' th'm," he replied. "Hammond's wife was among th' ones killed. Seven o' their nine wagons are gone, burned t' th' ground. We brought back the other two."

She eased herself over the wheel and he held up his arms. His big hands caught her. He lifted her and set her down gently on the ground. She avoided his eyes, smoothed her dress down to avoid looking up at him. He took her arm and led her up the line to the Anderson's wagon.

"Oh," she said when they stopped in front of it. "I wonder if Mrs. Archer is feeling better. Have you heard anything?"

"Y'mean you haven't?"

"Wh-y no, Bill."

"She's dead," he said grimly. "We buried 'er at noon."

Her hand tightened on his arm.

"Bill!" she said in a shocked voice.

"Her troubles are over," he added. "Look, I can't stand here all night so I'll make this short. When I d'cide t' get married, I'll be th' one to tell you. I won't leave it t' someb'dy else t' do. That clear? Next, that Katrina or Katey or whatever th' heck her name is she's a nice lookin' gal. That don't mean I'm gonna marry 'er even if her Ma does think it'd be a swell idea. I got some ideas o' my own an' they don't include th' Heydrichs. Now th' girl I marry's gonna be smart an' calm an' she ain't gonna be th' kind that acts up like a kid who's still wet behind the ears. You might remember that if you expect me t' marry you."

"And what makes you think I want you to?"

The grimness in his face vanished; he grinned into her face.

"You," he said calmly. He bent his head and kissed the tip of her nose. "Come on. Up you go."

He lifted her lightly. She caught the rim of the seat and pulled herself up, turned and looked down at him.

"See you in th' morning," he said as he turned away.

"Bill," she called.

He stopped, looked at her over his shoulder, then he came striding back.

"Yeah?"

"Bill, I'm awf'lly sorry I acted the way I did. It was childish and I'm sorry. But it won't happen again. That's a promise."

He reached up and patted her hand.

"Forget it," he said. "G'night."

"Good night, Bill."

IT WAS midnight and the train was shrouded in darkness and slumbering silence. Even the usually restless mules huddled together in silence. A wind raced over the range, rustled the grass, whipped some dust about. The canvas top of one of the darkened wagons creaked a bit when the wind surged against it; after a minute everything was quiet again.

Fifty feet from the Anderson wagon a man lay on his stomach in the grass. He raised himself once and looked northward when he thought he heard something; after a while he relaxed, turned over on his back and lay flat, looking up at the sky. Presently he rolled over on his stomach, got up on his knees, picked up his rifle and came erect on his feet. He looked toward the long double row of darkened wagons and shook his head.

"Damn foolishness, I calls it," he muttered. "Nob'dy in 'is right mind's gonna attack 'n outfit th' size o' this. I wish t' hell Cather or one o' the others was out here 'stead o' me. I'm so blamed tired an' sleepy, I'm damned if I know what's keepin' my eyes open. Could I do a job o' sleepin'! Bet I wouldn't wake up f'r a week if I got th' chance, 'specially right now."

He was stiffly silent for a moment, considering, then he trudged away, marched past the Anderson wagon, then past a couple of more, stopped finally in front of a huge prairie schooner, looked around quickly, then he got down on his knees and crawled in between the big wheels.

"Th' hell with it," he muttered. "I'm sleepy an' that's that. I ain't no soldier. If they want guards, let 'em hire 'em. Me, I'm gonna get me s'me sleep an' anybody who don't like it don't hafta."

He stretched out on his back with his rifle beside him, sighed deeply, wearily; after a minute he rolled over on his side. A minute later he was asleep. A wind droned over the range and swept dust and leaves over him but he did not move.

Fifty feet northward of his post shadowy figures crawled over the ground, stopped every few minutes to look up. Four shadows became four men when they came closer. They crept past the very spot on which he had been sprawled out earlier, inched their way forward to the train, and finally halted when they were within a dozen feet of it. One of the men turned and made a beckoning motion and his companions joined him. There was a minute-long whispered conversation, then the four men rose and rushed headlong

toward the wagons directly ahead of them. They came skidding up to them, dropped down and pushed their way in between the wheels, huddled behind them.

There was a strange scratching sound, then flame suddenly spurted out beneath the wagons, and the men, each of them gripping a couple of lighted faggots in their hands, came scrambling out. They had already chosen the wagons they would attack; accordingly they separated, and dashed away. A flaming brand was hurled atop one wagon and the heat-dried canvas covering instantly ignited; another wagon was similarly attacked but the firebrand slid off the canvas top and dropped on the driver's seat where it sputtered noisily for a moment, then flames ringed the seat and hungry fingers of fire reached out, some toward the wheels and the shaft while others raced up the length of the canvas curtain, spanned it and reached the top of the wagon and bit into it was a hissing sound that became an ominous crackling. Sparks from burning wagons leaped into the air and the wind caught them up, whipped them through space and dropped onto still other wagons. Flames broke out in a dozen places along the line; there was a scream, a cry, a yell, then there was a rush of booted feet.

"Come on!" a voice hollered.

Shadowy figures wheeled away from the burning wagons and darted off into the darkness. A rifle cracked and one of the running men stumbled and fell on his hands and knees; he forced himself up again, and staggered away when the rifle thundered a second time. The man stopped, stiffened and pitched forward on his facein the grass. There was a clatter of hoofs and a handful of horsemen, six or eight of them, came whirling down the line, swerved and dashed through a dark space between two wagons, then fanning out, they pounded away in pursuit of the faggot throwers.

"Don't let a one o' th'm get away!" a voice yelled.

In the darkness beyond the wagons a gun roared spitefully and a man cried out; other guns joined in, adding their voices to the mounting din of screams and crackling fires. A man seeking to escape a pursuing horseman came running back toward the wagons; he twisted around and fired. A rifle-armed man peered out at him from between the spokes of a big wheel, raised the rifle to his shoulder, poking the barrel between the spokes, aimed and pulled the trigger. The man with the six-gun in his hand stumbled awkwardly and nearly fell, braced himself on failing legs, steadied himself and slowly raised his gun. The rifle and the six-gun roared simultaneously. The six-gun slid out of the man's numbed hand and dropped into the grass. He fell limply to the ground. The rifleman dropped his weapon. He sagged against the wheel, crumpled up and fell backward into the shadows beneath the big wagon.

The train was fully awake now. Men ran this way and that. Men leaped up on the burning wagons and tore the canvas away, while others dashed up and helped frightened people to the ground. Mules milled about, brayed to be untied from the wagons. Knives flashed in the moonlight and cut into tethering ropes and the mules, released, wheeled and galloped away.

WHEN THE dawn sun arose, the smouldering embers of fourteen wagons offered mute testimony to the effectiveness of the attack. Groups of white-faced, tired-looking people stood around here and there. There was little or no conversation among them; they were too worn out, now that the shock of the attack had passed, to do anything but stand around even though many of them seemed to have little energy left for any purpose. When they moved it was listless, heavy-footed movement, and most times, all was movement. Twenty-one motionless, blanket-covered bodies lay on the ground between the rows of wagons. Heavy-lidded eyes stared at them and stunned heads bowed and shook. Tiny children, some of them not fully dressed, and some of them hollow-eyed and still showing signs of frenzied fright, wandered about too. Each time one

of them came up to the dead bodies, the child would stop and stare at them, circle them and go on quickly only to stop and look back, gasp and wheel and run.

Peggy Taylor was standing in front of the Anderson wagon when Bill Raines sauntered up.

"H'llo," he said. He leaned against the big wheel, eased his hat up from his eyes. His face was drawn and streaked and his hands were dirty.

"Can I get you anything, Bill? Some coffee?"

He shook his head.

"No, thanks. I've had moren'n my share o' coffee already."

She moved a bit closer to him.

"Bill, McBride will be back again, won't he?" she asked.

"Till he gets what he wants."

Her eyes ranged past him for a moment, over the groups of people beyond them.

"Y'see, Peg," he went on, "this is one o' th' biggest trains that ever set out f'r California, leastways it was in th' beginning when we had a hundred an' thirty-nine wagons an' rigs. Up t' now we've lost twenty-seven and there's maybe eight or ten just about ready t' fall apart th' minute we hit rough country. But gettin' back t' McBride, he's figgered out that a train this size must be carryin' a lot o' dough. Know what Cather's strong box had got in it?"

She turned to him again, and shook her head.

"Eighty-six thousan' dollars," he said. "Cash."

She smiled fleetingly.

"Two hundred of it is mine."

"None uv it's mine. Anyway, you know what McBride's after. All we c'n do is fight 'im off th' best way we can. 'Course we know he'll jump us every chance he gets so we've got t' be ready an' killin' every mile o' th' way into California. It'll be a blood trail all th' way an' we'll be sweatin' blood every inch uv it."

"Will we be here much longer?"

He shook his head.

"We're pullin' outta here at noon. Fix y'self somethin' t' eat early so you'll be set t' leave th' minute Cather gives the word."

4

The Long Trail

AT NOON, with a searing sun overhead, the train stirred itself into movement. Twenty rifle-armed horsemen rode on the flanks of the train to guard against a sudden swooping-down although no one, not even Cather, expected McBride to attempt an attack in broad daylight. But everyone seemed so uneasy once the train got under way that Cather quickly organized a crew of outriders and sent them loping away with instructions to shoot without a moment's delay if anything unusual or even questionable reared its head. As the train started off, the women and children in the party hurried to the rear of their respective wagons for a last look at the hastily cleared cemetery in which the twenty-one victims of McBride's attack had been laid to rest but an hour before. There was a single grave somewhat apart from the others; that was Sarah Archer's resting place.

The remnants of Hammond's group had been brought back, and were with them again.

Cather and Raines rode at the head of the train; a couple of hundred yards ahead of them rode two scouts. Every once in a while either Cather or Raines would swing around and ride back the full length of the train just to see that everything was all right; after a while, usually some fifteen or twenty minutes, the other would wheel away and lope back.

"McBride must've added to 'is outfit t' get up enough nerve t' tackle us," Cather remarked after a brief spell of thoughtful silence.

"Sure looks like it."

"Funny, ain't it," Cather mused, "how a bad man c'n always find comp'ny or know where t' go t' find it?"

"Word gets aroun'," Raines said, "an' soon's a bad man has hit the' trail he knows where t' go t' find some uv 'is own kin. You ever seen any o' them little one-hoss towns in th' hill country?"

"Nope."

"You haven't missed 'nything then, believe me. They ain't actu'lly towns. Usu'lly they ain't anything but a handful o' dirty shacks an' maybe a saloon, but that's all. Just a holin-up for bad men tryin' to keep a step ahead uv th' law and a hangin'. Most o' th' time every last man in those towns is hightailin' it from th' law so when another feller ridin' hell bent f'r election shows up, nob'dy asks 'im any questions. Everybody c'n tell by lookin' at 'im that he's one o' th'm an' nob'dy bothers 'im."

"How come the law don't do somethin' about th'm?"

"That sounds a heap easier than it is t' do," Raines answered. "You'd need a hull regiment o' cavalry t' do it an' where d'you s'ppose you'd get th' regiment? Usu'lly those towns are set on high ground with a c'mmanding view o' th' countryside f'r maybe miles around. You c'n figger out f'r y'self what a job it'd be any outfit, specially a posse with its dozen or even fifteen men, t' try attack a place like that. They wouldn't have a chance. A couple o' good shots with rifles shootin' down into them while they were havin' their own troubles ridin' uphill in rough country; hell, you wouldn't need more'n a couple o' men t' hold off a couple o' hundred. That's where outfits like ,McBride's are recruited."

"H'm," Cather said. "Well, we'll hafta keep our eyes peeled f'r 'em all th' time."

"And our rifles loaded an' handy, too."

THERE WAS no further conversation for a few minutes, then Raines wheeled his horse alongside of Cather's.

"Will, how far d'you figger t' go t' day?" the youth asked.

Cather smiled grimly.

"Just as far as we can," he answered. "If it wasn't f'r the women an' kids, I'd keep pushin' ahead straight through, clear up t' daylight. If McBride was t' attack us when we were on th' move, he wouldn't find it so easy, not with every man awake an' ready for 'im. His on'y chance is t' swoop down on us when we're sleepin'. But if we could drive by night an' lay up in the' daytime, he'd have one helluva party. He'd be lucky t' get away alive."

"Y'might have somethin' there."

Cather grunted.

"If that hellion pushes up too far, I'm damned if we don't try it," he asserted.

"Why wait f'r him t' give us another dose o' fire? We've had a sample uv it already an' th' twenty-three we left behind us prove that its hell."

"I know, son. But suppose we kinda wait an' see what happens fr'm now on."

Raines shrugged his shoulder.

"You're th' boss," he said. "On'y don't wait too long t' do it."

He wheeled his horse.

"Be back d'rectly." he said.

He glanced at the three people on the driver's seat of the Anderson wagon as he came abreast of it; Anderson was driving and Peggy Taylor, sitting between Anderson and Mrs. Anderson, looked over at him, wriggled a hand and waved. He winked at her in acknowledgement and he saw a smile cross Mrs. Anderson's face, saw her lips move as she said something to Peggy who blushed and quickly lowered her eyes. He loped on, came up to the first of the Heydrich wagons; Katey and Anna with the latter driving looked up at him and both smiled, Katey fleetingly and a bit shyly, and Anna with that purposeful, deepening, dimpling smile of hers. Raines touched his hat gravely as he rode past. Kurt Heydrich, alone on the wide seat of his second wagon, nodded to him and Bill nodded in response.

"Young feller!" Kurt called and Raines pulled up, wheeled and clattered back and rode alongside.

"Yeah?"

"How far are we going today?" Kurt asked.

"Far's we can."

"Good," Kurt said. "Good. Maybe then we can make up some time, no?"

"That's th' general idea," Bill said.

HE SWUNG around again and rode off. He looked to either side of the train as he rode its full

length, and when he came to the last wagon, he looked up at the driver who simply nodded and Raines wheeled and loped away to the head of the train. He pulled up alongside of Cather.

"Everything awright?" Cather asked.

Bill eased himself inthe saddle.

"So far," he replied.

An hour passed, two, three, then four and the crunching rumbling wheels rolled steadily westward. Five o'clock came and went and still Cather pushed on. The sun eased off presently, slipping away to the west, and shadows began to appear. The line of outriders on the northern side of the train bent in the middle as horsemen moved in close to the train, looking in Cather's direction, wondering mutely when he intended to stop; he gave no indication that he noticed it. He rode on doggedly, even grimly, with his eyes never shifting even the barest bit from the range that spread away before him. Slowly the line of horsemen drifted back, straightened out, and the train plodded on as before. After a while the shadows lengthened and deepened and finally, just as dusk came on, Cather jerked his mount to a stop. Raines pulled up too.

"Awight," Calther said, turning to him. "Reckon we've covered enough ground f'r t'day."

Bill nodded, wheeled and clattered back.

"Pull up!" he yelled though cupped hands. "Pull up!"

Wagon brakes squealed as they pulled up hard; tired mules standing on wide-spread, trembling legs, breathed loudly with a nasally wheeze. Raines twisted around when he heard hoof beats....he saw the two scouts ride up to Cather's side, saw them halt there and ease themselves in their saddles. Raines rode on.

"Don't crowd th' feller in front o' you," he called. He wanted to add, "Fire c'n spread like all get-out once it gets started," but he held his tongue.

He rode between two wagons and onto the range. An outrider looked up hopefully.

"We're campin' here f'r t'night," Bill called to him.

The man turned, whipped off his dust caked hat and waved it. The other horsemen came riding toward the train as swiftly as their horses could negotiate the distance. Raines turned his mount and rode back to where Cather had stopped. He nodded to the scouts when they trudged past him leading their horses.

"Might be a good idea," he said to Cather, "to string out another bunch o' riflemen t'night. They could bust up a sneak attack even b'fore it got started. That awright with you?"

"Yeah, sure," the older man said quickly. "I'm f'r anything that'll save lives."

"Got another idea, too," Raines said with a grin. "How would it be if we were t' start a hull circle of fires, sort o' ring th' train with th'm, say at about a hundred feet away from th' train an' th' fires 'bout forty or fifty feet apart? We could keep 'em burnin' full blast all night long, an' if any o' McBride's mavericks tried t' come through, hell, it'd be like shootin' at a standin' target t' knock 'em off. How's it sound t' you? Awright?"

"Sounds like you're expectin' company t'night," Will Cather said.

"An' how I'm expectin' it," Raines said calmly. "But I won't be th' least bit disappointed if nob'dy shows up."

CATHER LOOKED at him for a moment.

"You get 'ny more bright ideas," he said, "an' I'll be lookin' f'r a new job. What are you tryin' t' do show up th' old man?"

"Huh?" the youth asked innocently. "What d'you mean, show you up? You don't realize it, partner, but it's little things that you say fr'm time t' time that give me ideas so you're just as much responsible f'r 'em as I am. That showin' you up?"

Cather laughed.

"G'wan,' he said. "Don't try t' pull th' wool over my eyes."

"On th' level, Will."

"You're th' blamedest, doggonedest liar an' you know it," Cather insisted.

"Could be," the youth said easily and quite unworried. "But if you keep it t' y'self, nob'dy else'll ever know it."

"G'wan," Cather said again. "Go get y'self some grub, you fresh young pup an' don't try t' fool th' old man again. Y'hear?"

"Nope," Raines said with a grin. "An' if anybody asks me how come th' fires or th' outriders, I'm gonna tell 'em it was all your idea. So there."

He wheeled his mount and rode away. Cather followed him with admiring eyes.

"I wouldn't trade that young feller f'r a hundred men even up," he muttered. "He's got more guts an' more natural savvy th'n anybody I ever saw. He's awright, plenty awright, b'lieve me. An' with th' gift o' gab he's got, he could talk a painted post into believin' it was a gazelle."

RIFLEMEN, only this time they were dismounted and ordered to squat in the shadows out of range of the crackling fires that ringed the train, took up their posts under Bill Raines' eye. The fires themselves were started on stony ground and as an added precaution to prevent the flames from feasting on and spreading over the sun-dried grass, rocks and stones were heaped around the base of each fire, thus confining each to its immediate spot. The only fear therefore was of a strong wind, but fortunately while it was cool, even chilly, the wind was negligible and few sparks were wafted away from the fires.

At the Andersons' insistence, Will Cather rolled himsef up in his blankets in Peggy's wagon, and fifteen minutes after, when John Anderson peered in on him, he found Cather fast asleep and 'snoring like a good feller'. Raines did not turn in..he insisted he couldn't and added, when Peggy looked at him, that he'd sleep all the next day. Peggy shook her head but he chucked her under the chin, tossed her a cheery 'good night' and went off.

"You're going to marry him, aren't you?" Mrs. Anderson asked when they were alone behind the canvas drop.

Peggy didn't answer as promptly as she should have and Mrs. Anderson smiled understandingly.

"You don't have to answer," she said. "You two were meant for each other. Anyone can see that. It's in your eyes and in his, the way you look at each other and so on."

Peggy smiled a little, and blushed a little.

"He's asked you, of course, hasn't he?"

"We-ll, not exactly."

Mary Anderson's eyes widened.

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry, Peggy. I...."

"I meant," Peggy said quickly, "that while he hasn't actually asked me, he's told me."

"Told you?" Mrs. Anderson repeated, then she laughed softly. "O-h, I see! But I suppose that that's the way of the modern generation. Imagine a young man telling a young woman in my time that he was going to marry her and considering the subject closed and final. Our mothers would have had a fit!"

Peggy smiled again.

"I'm sure it would have been different with us if conditions had been different," she explained. "Riding in a wagon, doesn't exactly lend itself to romance, you know, particularly with so many people watching you all the time and so many things happening all around you. Then too Bill's had to be on the go all the time, or nearly all the time, doing his work as Mr. Cather's assistant. So you mustn't think badly of him."

Mrs. Anderson patted Peggy's hand.

"I don't at all," she said quickly. "In view of conditions, I think he's done wonderfully well. And now that I think of things, it's a wonder to me that you two had any time together at all."

"We didn't have very much," Peggy admitted. "It was mostly at supper-time or for just a little while after supper that we got a chance to talk and what little we know about each other..."

There was a sudden thumping on the floor of the wagon, and Peggy stopped abruptly and looked at Mrs. Anderson.

"Hey," a muffled voice said from under the wagon. "How d'you expect a feller t' sleep with all that jawin' goin' on, huh?"

"It's John," Mary Anderson said. "We'd better get to bed. Ready?"

Peggy got under the blanket.

"Ready," she said.

Mrs. Anderson blew out the lamp light. She groped her way in the darkness to Peggy's side, climbed in beside her, settled herself with a sigh. But there was no further conversation..they were tired, and presently their gentle breathing indicated that they were asleep.

IT WAS shortly after midnight when Bill Raines came trudging through the grass midway between the darkened wagons and the line of riflemen.

"Looks like we all coulda turned in," a voice said from the shadows nearby. "That McBride ain't gonna come messin' around here t'night."

Raines halted.

"How d'you know?" he asked.

"O-h, if he was comin', he'da been here by now," the man insisted.

"Y'mean he on'y works certain hours, or have you an' him got it arranged when he c'n pull off a raid an' when he can't?"

"That s'pposed t' be funny?"

"It ain't supposed t' be anything. I'm on'y askin' a question."

"Look, Mister," the man said. "I ain't here t' take 'ny sass fr'm you or anybody else. That clear?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Awright then. How'd you like t' take over f'r me, huh? You don't give a damn if you sleep or not. Me, I like t' sleep when it comes night. How 'bout it?"

"Got a family in th' train?" Raines asked.

"Sure, but what's that gotta do with it?"

"Just this. Long's we've got women an' kids t' take care uv, we've gotta do everything we can t' protect th'm. Standin' guard at night so's t' pr'vent McBride fr'm pullin' off another sneak raid an' killin' off some more o' our people is one o' th' things we've gotta do. That too much f'r you t' understand?"

"Look, Mister..."

"I'm lookin'," Bill said curtly. "If standin' guard to pr'tect your own family's askin' too much o' you, you go 'head an' turn in. Chances are you wouldn't be a damned bit o' good aroun' here if a raid was pulled off anyway. Go 'head. We c'n get along without you."

"Why, you..."

"Yeah?" the tall youth taunted.

"Long's I'm out here, I'll stay put, but th' first thing t'morrow mornin' I'm gonna hunt you up an' when I catch up with you, I'm gonna give you th' damnedest wallopin' anybody ever got."

"I c'n hardly wait," Raines said. "O-h, yeah, just in case you f'rget or get cold feet, an' I hafta go hunt you up, where'll I find you?"

The man laughed. He climbed to his feet and stretched himself. He was a big fellow. In the distorting night light he was huge.

"Just ask anybody in th' train f'r Tom Howell," he answered lightly. "Everybody knows me. They'll be able t' tell you where I'm at."

"Right," Raines said and he strode away.

THERE WAS no attack, not even a sign of McBride or of his men, and the uneventful night, long and wearying, seemed unending. The fires died out just before dawn and no one did anything to rekindle them. The guards, relaxing, climbed stiffly to their feet, stamped them on the ground, yawned and stretched and looked skyward. Empty, colorless and drab one minute, the next minute the sky was filled with awakening light. The shadows of night lifted and vanished into thin air, and then it was day. Tom Howell was hitching up his pants when he heard an approaching footstep. He turned, looked hard and grunted.

"Oh-h," he said. "So it's you, eh?"

"Yep," Raines said. "In th' flesh."

Howell grunted again.

"This spot suit you awright?" he asked.

"Good as any other I suppose."

Howell gave him a curious look, took off his hat and scaled it away. He unbuckled his gun belt, wound the belt around the holstered gun and put it down in the grass. He unbottoned his shirt and took it off and tossed it aside, hitched up his pants again and looked up.

"Awright," he said. "Come an' get it."

Raines smiled fleetingly.

"Sure," he said. "Anything t' oblige."

Howell, his big fists clenched and raised, came plunging across the grass. Raines side-stepped nimbly and Howell' swinging right fist missed him completely. He turned to meet the big man's second rush. It came without a moment's loss of time. This time Raines did not side-step at once; he waited until Howell was almost upon him, then he twisted away, ducked under a second wild swing, came up suddenly with a short-arm jolt that landed squarely in the pit of Howell's stomach. Howell grunted and dropped his hands and Raines promptly struck him in the face, and just as promptly moved away again.

Howell came lunging after him. Raines, whipping around, drove a long, lightning-like left into the man's face, brought up his right fist with an echoing thud, and when he stepped back again there was a crimson smear on Howell's lips and blood bubbles in his nostrils. Howell moved toward him again. He was breathing through his open mouth. He plunged across the intervening space, swung a big fist wildly, missed by a wide margin, and took a hard, full-bodied punch in return. It made him gasp and he stumbled and fell on his hands and knees. Raines suddenly became aware of a circle of spectators. He made no attempt to force the fighting; he backed a bit, his hands lowered, and waited.

Howell dragged himself up. Slowly he advanced, with his guard high to protect his battered face. Cautiously he thrust out his left. Raines brushed it aside and in almost the same motion drove his own left fist wrist deep into Howell's stomach. Howell grimaced; when a second left landed in exactly the same place, he gave ground.

SUDDENLY there was a yell from somewhere along the length of the train; and everyone looked up quickly. Raines and Howell turned and looked up too. There was another yell, a more frenzied yell this time, and the sudden crack of a rifle. Flames leaped upward almost from the very ground and enveloped the last wagon in line. Then the wagon directly in front of it burst into flames. A third wagon, a fourth, and then a fifth wagon began to burn. The entire train awoke. Men came leaping out of wagons all along the line; women and children appeared too and in another moment the train was in an uproar. Children were trampled and knocked down, screaming, hysterical women clawed at men who bumped into them, and plunging, running men collided full tilt with other men. Punches were thrown wildly in the excitement.

Raines bolted away. Howell, breathing heavily through his bloodied mouth, leaped after him. The other men, moved to action, followed behind then. Raines headed for a burning wagon directly ahead of him; Howell swerved away in another direction. There was a handful of people standing around the wagon when Raines panted up; he shouldered them out of his way, leaped up on the driver's seat, ripped off the flame-ringed canvas curtain and cast it away. He reached up, got a grip on the canvas top, jerked it furiously; it came away suddenly and he whirled around and sent it hurtling groundward. A couple of men jumped on it, stamped the flames out of it.

"Anybody in there?" a man yelled to Bill.

Raines shook his head.

"What'd you say?" the man yelled.

The smoke filled Raines' eyes and throat.

"Nob'dy in here," he managed to say.

The man wheeled and darted off. Raines jumped down to the ground. The framework of the wagon was burning but there was little that anyone could do about it. The onlookers moved away. The biggest crowd was standing around the very last wagon in the line and Raines trudged up to it.

"This one's a goner, too," a man said at his elbow. "Wish t' hell I'd got th' hellion who set it on fire. I got one shot at 'im an' honest t' God, I never saw a feller run as fast as he did."

"Who's this wagon belong to?"

"Tom Howell."

"O-h, yeah? Tom Howell, eh? S-ay, how 'bout his family? They get out awright?"

"Yeah, sure," the man answered quickly. "On'y now that I think uv it, th' last I saw o' Tom he went back into th' wagon t' get somethin' an' I'm damned if I saw 'im come out or not." He turned around. "Any o' you folks see Tom Howell?"

THERE WAS no answer. The flames from the burning wagon reached out hungrily and the onlookers moved back quickly. The framework that supported the rounded top fell in on one side. A woman screamed and pointed hysterically.

"Look! Look!" she screamed and pointed falteringly. "A hand!"

Others pointed to a hand that came creeping out of the folds of burning canvas along the edge of the wagon's wooden wall, then the hand was withdrawn. Raines pushed the man out of his way, leaped up on the wheel, yanked off the curtain that hung in smoking tatters, tossed it to the ground, then he eased himself over the wide seat, and dropped off it into the burning interior of the wagon. A couple of other men jumped up on the wagon..one of them climbed up on the seat, and bent down as if he were helping lift something. Another man jumped down, turned and held up his hands.

"Awright!" he yelled. "Lemme have 'im!"

Some men among the onlookers joined him. There was some straining just behind the seat, some labored shoving and lifting, then a pair of booted feet came into view and a woman in the crowd gasped aloud. Now a body was being slid over the seat and big hands reached it, got hold of it, cradled it in strong arms and backed away with it. A path opened before the men and they carried their burden to a grassy stretch of ground and laid it down. The men in the wagon climbed down. Raines, dirty-faced, made his way down to the ground just as the remaining side of the framework fell in. Sparks leaped high into the air, spun around for a moment and dropped earthward. Men and children jumped for them, stamped them out. Raines stumbled away, sank down on the ground and sprawled out on his back. He closed his smarting eyes.

"Hey!" a man yelled. "He ain't dead! He's alive!"

There were more excited yells and everyone gathered around the figure stretched out on the grass. Raines forced himself up into a sitting position. A man came running past him, jerked to a stop, retraced his steps and halted in front of him.

"Howell's awright," he said excitedly. "Got a belly full o' smoke an' s'me burns but outside o' that he's awright!"

5

The House Divided

AT MID-MORNING when the train got under way again smoke was still rising from the burned out hulks of the five wagons. By noon seven more were abandoned; three o'clock saw two more evacuated and left behind as the train ground its way doggedly westward, and at evening when the train came to a halt, a tally of the wagons drawn up in the usual double line totalled eighty-one in all.

"Eighty-one left outta a hundred an' thirty-nine," Will Cather said grimly. "That means we've lost fifty-eight wagons shot t' hell."

Bill Raines nodded.

"An' we're still a helluva long ways fr'm California," he added.

"That's just what I'm thinkin' uv," Cather said. "I wish t' hell we were there now so's everyone could go his own way an' I wouldn't hafta t' worry about what was gonna happen t'night an' maybe another hundred more nights."

"What's happened an' what's gonna happen ain't any o' your doin'," the youth said.

Cather grunted.

"Maybe an maybe not. But what's happened has happened an' since I'm th' one in charge, I'm th' one t' blame. Bill, it's gettin' me down, an' that's th' truth."

"Hell..."

"That's th' way I feel about it. An' somehow I even feel that some o' th' responsibility f'r th' ones who've died on this trip, we-ll, some uv it's mine."

"Don't be a damned fool, Will!"

"It's awright f'r you t' say it wasn't my fault, Bill, but you make it your bus'ness t' notice th' expressions on th' faces o' those who've lost some o' their folks an' you'll see right off how they feel about me. An' it ain't kindly, b'lieve me. You watch 'em when I pass 'em or they come past me."

"Wait a minute," Raines said quickly. "What d'you make o' this?"

"Huh? What are you talkin' about?"

"Hammond an' a bunch o' men are headed this way an' somethin' tells me you're gonna have more trouble on your hands."

Cather turned quickly. He glared at the approaching men and spat in the grass.

"That kind o' trouble I c'n handle," he said. He hitched up his pants. "Let 'em come."

There were ten men in addition to the lanky, sour-looking Hammond. They came striding up, stopped and looked at Hammond who stepped forward.

"Well?" Cather demanded. "What've you cooked up this time, Mister Hammond?"

The lanky man flushed.

"I'm here because th' men've asked me t' do their talkin'," he replied with an attempt at dignity.

"Awright," Cather said briskly. "I'm listenin'. Go ahead an' talk."

Hammond cleared his throat.

"TH' MEN seem t' think we might do better if we had someone else in charge o' th' train," he said.

Cather smiled.

"Y'mean with you in charge, don't you?"

"I'm only tellin' you what th' men asked me t' say f'r them," he said a bit stiffly.

"Awright, you've said it. So what?"

"I think they might have somethin'."

"O-h, you do, eh?"

"Wait a minute," a man said and he stepped up beside Hammond. "Look, Will, it ain't that we ain't got all th' faith in th' world in you."

"Course," Cather said dryly.

"It's just that we think that may be with someone else runnin' things...."

"Like Hammond?"

The man flushed.

"You're tryin' to put words in my mouth, Will. Gimme a chance, will yuh, t' say what I wanna say?"

Cather grunted.

"You fellers sounded out th' rest o' th' folks? D'they want me t' step down, too?"

"We haven't sounded out anybody," the man replied.

Cather laughed.

"Mister Hammond's losin' his touch," he said. "Used t' be he'd cook up somethin', like that last scheme o' his that went sour, then he'd kinda sneak around where I couldn't see what he was doin', he'd get things set an' then he'd spring 'em on me. McBride must've scared th' pants off 'im. He ain't th' same any more."

"Aw, Will...."

"You fellers an' th' other folks hired me," Cather continued, "so you've got th' right t' fire me. If th' folks in th' train feel th' same's you fellers do, let 'em say so, an' I'll quit."

"Y'mean, Will, if a m'jority o' th'

folks want to make a change, it'll be awright with you?"

"Sure."

"That's doggoned decent o' you," the man said. "Come on, you fellers. Long's Will is willing t' be fair about it, we'll be th' same. We'll keep outta things. We'll leave th' decidin' to the others. If th' m'jority still want Will t' run things, then awright an' that'll be that. But if they want someb'dy else, they'll get someb'dy else. Come on."

Hammond had stood quietly; now when the others turned and started away, he fell in with them and trudged along.

"Well?" Cather demanded.

Raines shrugged his shoulder.

"What d'you want me t' say?" he countered. "You know danged well you won't do what I tell you to."

"I'm listenin'."

"Awright. It's plain as the nose on your face that 'less you do somethin' an' pronto, you're gonna be out've a job. 'Stead o' gettin' up on your high horse an' makin' mad faces, you better hustle back t' th' train an' speak your little piece. Everybody knows you know more about runnin' a train than Hammond'll ever know, but if you don't remind th'm uv it, he'll sell th'm a bill o' goods an' he'll wind up with your job an' you'll have nothing."

"I'm stayin' right here. If they're dumb enough t' fall f'r what he tells th'm, he c'n have th' job an' what happens t' th'm afterward won't be 'ny skin offa my nose.'

"WHATEVER you say," Raines said. "You're a stubborn ol' coot an' maybe you oughta get what's comin' to you. But I got some o' that Missouri mule in me too so I suppose all I c'n do is stay put an' trail along with you no matter what happen. 'Course I know I'll be sorry f'r it afterwards, but what th' heck?"

Cather bristled; Raines looked away hastily. He didn't want Cather to see the grin on his face.

"I don't need 'nybody t'trail along with me," Cather reported. "G'wan, you wall-eyed young pup—chase y'self."

"Nope," Raines said. "Nothing doing. An' don't try t' flatter me. It wont do 'ny good. I'm stuck with you an' that's that."

Cather looked at him suddenly.

"What are yu lookin' at me like that fr, huh?"

Cather smiled, then he laughed.

"Bill, y'know what?"

"What?"

"I hired you, didn't I?"

"Uh-huh. So what?"

"What d'you figger is gonna happen when I get fired?"

"O-h, Hammond'll do somethin' hairbrained like he did before."

"'Course he will, you idiot!" Cather exploded. "D'you think I need you t'tell me that?"

"N-o, I s'ppose not."

"But gettin' back t' you, *MISTER* Raines, th' train didn't hire you. I did. I hired you t' work f'r me an' I've been payin you outta my own pocket. So th' way I figger it *MISTER* Smarty Pants, if I lose my job, you lose yours. Just what d'you aim t' do about that, huh?"

"Not a damned thing," the youth said calmly.

"Then don't you go tellin' me t' do somethin', you young so-an'-so!" Cather roared.

* * *

ANNA AND Katey Heydrich were sitting on the driver's seat of their wagon, while Kurt, his back to them, leaned against one of the big wheels, his interest and attention on a group of twenty feet away.

"What will we do, Mama?" Katey asked.

Kurt turned his head.

"Do?" he repeated. "First we will wait and see. Then we will do."

Katey moved forward.

"But, Papa, if everyone decided to go along with that Hammond man, we can't do anything else but go with him too."

"Everyone will not go with Hammond," Kurt said calmly. "There are many who do not like him, or trust him. For me, he talks too much and too loud."

"Papa is right, Katrina," Anna said She patted her daughter's hand. "Let us wait and see. Then we can decide."

"Hammond comes," Kurt said. "Quiet."

Hammond came striding up to the wagon. He nodded to Kurt, raised his eyes to Anna and Katey, smiled fleetingly and touched the brim of his hat.

"Evenin'," he said. "I suppose you folks know what's goin' on without me havin' to tell you?"

"We know," Kurt said.

"Good. Saves me th' job o' tellin' my story all over again an' Lord on'y knows I'm about talked out. You folks are throwin' in with th' rest uv us; right"

"No," Kurt said. "It is not right."

Hammond's head jerked around. Kurt's eyes did not waver.

"We-ll," Hammond said with a curious heaviness. "If that's th' way you feel about it, awright. I kinda figgered that after all th' delays we've hadda put up with, all th' killin's we've had t' stand for an' all th' burnin's, anything'd be a heap better. Guess I was wrong."

There was no comment from the Heydrichs. Hammond looked from one to the other, then he shrugged his shoulder turned on his heel and marched off.

Ten minutes later a horseman rode up to the wagon, drew rein and looked up at Kurt.

"Understand you folks are gonna trail along with Cather. That right?"

Kurt nodded.

"So am I," the man added. "Got 'nything in th' strong box? If you have, hustle over an' get it. Cather wants th' folks who are stringin' along with him t' get their stuff b'cause he's turnin' th' box over t' Hammond. Better get over there now, Heydrich."

Kurt hurried away. The mounted man wheeled his horse.

"Please," Anna said and he checked the animal and looked at Anna. "There are many others who have refused to go with this Hammond?"

"O-h, about a dozen," the man answered. "The Andersons, th' Turners, th' Kellys, an' o-h, I kinda f'rget f'r th' minute who th' others are but all told we'll prob'bly have about a dozen families left. Tom Howell's stringin' along with Cather. I was kinda surprised t' hear that 'cause he an' Hammond were pretty thick there f'r a while."

"There is a young lady," Anna said. "Her name is Taylor, I believe."

"Y'mean Peggy Taylor?"

Anna smiled.

"Yes."

"She's with us, too. Great girl that Peggy. Understand she an' that young Raines are gonna get hitched soon's we get a breathin' spell. We-ll, gotta get goin' again. Be seein' you folks."

The man rode away; a minute later he came clattering back.

"Look," he said. "When Hammond an' th' ones goin' with him pull out, you folks stay put. After they've gone, we'll all move up."

HE RODE off again. Anna and Katey looked at each other. Suddenly Anna's right hand flashed upward, then it came sweeping downward in an echoing slap across Katey's face. The girl's head snapped back; for a moment she was stunned, speechless, incapable of any movement or show of emotion.

"Fool, you," Anna said thickly. Katey's hand crept up to her tingling cheek. She touched it gently. "For you, I am nice to this Raines. But what good does it do? No good. You sit and you wait and you dream, and while you do nothing, this girl, this nobody, she gets him. Sometimes you make me so mad I could...."

Katey leaped to her feet. Anna thrust out a restraining hand but there was no stopping Katey now. She brushed it aside, then with incredible swiftness she had gathered her skirts together, went over the wheel, jumped to the ground, wheeled and fled.

"Katrina!"

There was no response. Half up out of the wide seat Anna sank down again. She sat quietly, hunched up.

She did not look up when Kurt returned and climbed up and settled back beside her. Suddenly he realized that Katey wasn't there.

"Katrina," he said. "She has gone to bed already?"

"No."

Kurt turned his head and looked at his wife.

"You do not feel so good, Anna?" he asked.

"O-h, I'm all right. It's Katrina."

"She is sick?"

"I don't know what she is," Anna said. "All of a sudden she stood up, jumped off the wagon and ran away."

"Our Katrina did that?" Kurt asked. He was surprised and his voice reflected it. "I do not understand. And you have no idea why she did that?"

"I don't know unless it was because I slapped her."

"Oh," he said. "I see now. And why did you slap her?"

"Because she made me mad."

Kurt drew a deep breath.

"You know, Anna, sometimes you make me mad. You know that? But I do not slap you."

Anna was silent.

"I think you should go and look for her," Kurt said quietly. "Now, Anna."

"Kurt, I'm tired. She will come back. It is night and she will not go far."

He climbed to his feet.

"Since you are tired, go to bed," he said. "I am not tired so I will go look for her." He stepped past her, swung his body over the wheel and dropped to the ground. He looked up at Anna. "You must not slap her again, Anna. You hear? I will not have it."

He turned away without waiting for her reply.

HAMMOND'S followers were on the move. Their big wagons lumbered by and Kurt hurried between them. He peered up at each wagon as it passed him, eyed those on the driver's seat. When he came to a wagon that was standing still he did the same thing. It was probably fifteen minutes later when he came face to face with Bill Raines.

"Excuse me," he said. "Perhaps you have seen my daughter?"

Raines shook his head.

"Nope," he answered. "Ain't she with your wife? They're usually t'gether."

"Katrina is not with her."

Raines looked at him. He sensed that there was something wrong.

"O-h," he said. "I wouldn't worry too much. It's night an' nobody wanders off very far in th' dark. Chances are by th' time you get back t' your wagon she'll be there too."

Kurt did not answer; neither did he move.

"Look," said Raines. "Maybe she's visitin' one o' th' other wagons. You have a look aroun'. I'll keep 'n eye open f'r 'er too. I'll stop by later on an' check with you. Awright?"

Kurt smiled his thanks and went on his way. Raines turned and watched him for a moment.

"Mama an' 'er beautiful daughter must've had words an' daughter prob-'bly went off somewhere's in a huff," he muttered.

Presently he went striding down the line, stopping every now and then to look up when a wagon in motion came abreast of him.

It was an hour later when the last of Hammond's wagons had gone and the remaining wagons were moving up to form a more compact line behind the Anderson wagon. Will Cather, tight-lipped and visibly angry, came striding up to Raines.

"How many we got left?" Cather asked.

"Fourteen," Raines replied.

"How come? Thought there were on'y a dozen?"

"Couple o' th'm changed their mind at th' last minute," the youth explained.

"H'm," Cather grunted. There was a sudden distant roar of gunfire and Cather stiffened in his tracks, his hand tightening on Raines' arm. The crash of guns swelled momentarily. Slowly Cather turned westward.

MEN WITH rifles in their hands appeared. They looked quickly at Cather who looked at them and slowly shook his head.

"That ain't any uv our affair," he said quietly. "It might even be a trick t' get us t' leave our wagons an' go t' help Hammond. We're stayin' put on'y we'll be set f'r anything if anything comes this way. Couple o' you fellers get th' women folks an' their kids outta th' wagons an' under 'em, then those o' you with rifles hustle out a ways, say about fifty feet and squat down in the grass low as you can. If any o' McBride's hellions show up, blast 'em down before they o'n reach th' wagons. Hustle it up, you fellers."

The men scattered. Cather jerked out his gun.

"Bill, you take th' tail end o' th' train," he commanded. "I'll take th' front end. B'tween us we oughta be able t' keep things under control. Go 'head, boy."

The distant outburst of firing slackened off, swelled, and slackened off again. Then the sky westward brightened and glowed and anxious eyes probing it knew that it meant but one thing: fire. There was no need to tell them that Hammond's train had run into trouble while it was rumbling on; probably it had been ambushed and the deepening crimson in the sky was an indication of what had happened. The firing swelled and eased off again in turn but it was fully half an hour before it finally died away. It was midnight when Cather came down the line in search of Raines.

"Think Hammond beat 'em off?" Raines asked.

"Must've," Cather answered. "I'm just wonderin' how many lives an' wagons it cost him. Still got your men standin' guard?"

"O-h, sure," Raines said quickly. "I'm figgerin' on keepin' 'em out there f'r th' rest o' th' night."

There was a step behind them and they turned. Anna Heydrich looked up at them.

"Y'better get back t' your wagon, Ma'm," Cather said. "T'aint safe out in th' open, y'know."

"Wait a minute, Will," Raines said quickly. "I think I know what Missus Heydrich wants. Katey's awright, ain't she?"

Anna smiled wanly in the night light.

"I do not know," she said. "Perhaps she is with her father. You have seen my husband, Kurt?"

"I saw 'im awright," Raines answered. "On'y that was earlier in th' evenin'. Ain't he been back t' th' wagon since then?"

Anna shook her head.

"Look, Ma'm," the tall youth said. "Suppose you go back t' your wagon an' wait there while I have a look around? Then I'll come over an' tell you how I made out? Awright?"

Anna seemed undecided.

"That makes sense t' me," Cather said. "You leave things t' Bill, Ma'm. He'll take care o' th'm."

ANNA LOOKED at him, turned slowly and plodded away.

"What's this all about, Bill?" Cather asked.

"I dunno exactly," Raines replied. "Earlier this evenin' her husband come up t' me an' asked me if I'd seen their daughter. You know 'er, Will, a good lookin' girl with blonde hair like her mother's."

"Yeah, sure. I've seen 'er any number o' times even though I've never said anything to 'er."

"I got 'n idea that mama an' 'er daughter had some words an' Katrina, th' daughter y'know, we-ll, she probably got peeved an' stalked off. But where in hell she went to, I'm damned if I know."

"But what about papa? Where d'you suppose he is?"

"Y'got me there, Will, 'less he's still out lookin' for Katrina."

"Th' range is a helluva big place t' hafta look f'r someb'dy," Cather said dryly. " 'Specially at night."

"I know," Raines said. "I think I better get started. Think you c'n handle things f'r both uv us?"

Cather grunted and the youth laughed.

"See you later, Will," Raines called over his shoulder.

"Watch y'self," Cather responded.

He followed the striding youth with his eyes, saw him stop at the first wagon he came to, bend down and talk with someone under the wagon.

"As if we ain't got enough trouble as it is," Cather muttered as he saw Bill straighten up and march off toward the next wagon. "We gotta have families fightin' amongst th'mselves. Wish t' hell they'd save their mads f'r McBride. An' speakin' o' him, I'd sure like t' get a bead on that polecat. I'd blast him fr'm here t' hell an' back again."

6

Life Is For the Living

KATEY HEYDRICH'S choked up emotions burst when she stumbled away from her mother's wagon. She was sobbing hysterically and her thoughts were confused and incoherent. Like a thoroughly frightened child who had been whipped without understanding why she had been whipped, she plunged away blindly, seeking instinctively to put distance between the one who had whipped her and herself. She came around the wagon and skidded to a stop. There was movement and excitement all around her....the train was dividing itself in two, and those who had chosen to accept Hammond's leadership in preference to continuing under Will Cather were already on the move.

The excitement made Katey forget her own trouble for a moment, and she watched with interest as big, top-heavy prairie schooners and equally big farm wagons that were more solidly built rumbled past. The tailboard of one wagon was down and every time the wagon lurched the tailboard swung free and then it came thumping down against the rear wheels. Katey's eyes ranged past the tailboard to a length of thick rope that hung just inside the wagon from the curving top of its framework and dropped to within an inch or two of the flooring.

She gathered her skirts together and darted after the wagon, and when the rope swung out she flung up both hands and grabbed it and leaped upward off the ground and into the wagon. She collided with a heavy packing case that refused to give way before her and she went sprawling in the wagon's dark interior. Fortunately she did not cry out; it was fortunate for her because a man came running up to the wagon, swung the tailboard up and it slammed into place.

"Awright!" she heard the man yell. "It's up. You c'n go ahead now!"

A whip cracked and the mules pulling the wagon quickened their pace. Katey got up on her knees and huddled there. She peered around the packing case. Fortunately too the canvas curtain at the front of the wagon hung at its full length, shutting out the driver from the rest of the wagon, and Katey, regaining her composure, breathed easier. Slowly she sank down on the floor, rested her back and head against the case. When the wagon lurched, the case started to slide toward the tail and Katey had to brace herself against it to hold it in place.

She heard hoofbeats and she raised her head. There was no canvas curtain at the rear of the wagon and she could see out very clearly by peering over the top of the raised tailboard. She became aware of another wagon following directly behind them, then of other wagons behind the second one. She wondered if the people in the second wagon could see her. She decided they couldn't because she couldn't see them. A horseman came up abreast of the second wagon and he and the driver talked briefly but indistinctly, that is, as far as Katey was concerned. Then the horseman clattered past.

"Hey, Hammond!" Katey heard him call again. "You gonna keep goin' right straight through th' night?"

"Yep," came the answer in a voice that Katey recognized as Hammond's. She caught her breath when she realized that Hammond's voice had come from the front of the wagon she was

riding in. "We've got a helluva lotta time t' make up an' I'm gonna push these danged mules 'till we get t' where we're headed f'r or they drop."

The horseman didn't answer; he simply wheeled his mount and rode back along the line of wagons.

KATEY HADN'T given a thought to her parents; now she thought of them and when Anna's face flashed through her mind, her lips tightened. She would never forgive Anna, she told herself. As for her father, she wasn't angry with him. Kurt had always been kindly toward her. In fact, now that she thought of it, she couldn't recall ever having seen Kurt angry. Poor Kurt, he'd feel badly about losing her. Anna wouldn't; she was hard and unbending. They'd never see her again. When she got to California, she'd disappear altogether. Perhaps after a while she'd manage to get word to Kurt that she was alive and well, but she'd warn him that he wasn't to breathe a word of it to Anna. Anna had to be punished. There weren't any two ways about that. She'd make herself strong and unbending too, and then maybe one day Anna and she would meet. Her eyes gleamed for an instant. She'd live just for that day. She didn't know what she'd do when that day arrived; she'd worry about it later on.

Then a thought came to her and it made her sit up.

She hadn't any money and the only clothes she had were the ones she was wearing. What would she do when she got to California? The thought frightened her. She'd never been in such a predicament. Whenever she had needed anything, there had always been Kurt to turn to, or Anna; she wouldn't think of Anna again, she told herself. She'd only think of Kurt. We-ll, there wasn't any sense in worrying about it now. California was a long way off. The rumbling wagon made her drowsy and finally her eyes closed; she opened them again shortly, but only briefly, because the motion of the wagon lulled her off to sleep.

She did not open her eyes when she felt herself being lifted and carried and then being put down again. She felt her head being raised and something soft being placed under it, then a blanket was draped over her A strong arm imprisoned her, held her tight. A scream formed on her lips; it was stifled when a heavy hand was clapped over her mouth, bruising her lips.

"Listen a minute," a man's voice whispered in her ear. She tried to squirm away but there was no escaping him. "Use your head. I'm runnin' this train an' what I say goes. If you act up, I'll boot you outta this wagon an' then where'll you be? Out on th' range with nob'dy within fifty miles t' hear you or help you. If you're nice t' me, maybe when we get t' California, I c'n do somethin' for you. But that's up to you. Now what'll it be, huh?"

She pulled away suddenly, brought her knee up hard; the man gasped and in that instant she had whipped off the covers, scrambled to her feet, flashed to the canvas curtain and thrown it back. She never knew how she managed to get over the driver's seat, over the high wheel and down to the ground..but she did..and then she began to run.

"Come back here, damn you!" she heard an angry voice cry but she ran even faster.

She heard pounding feet behind her as she fled along the line of plodding wagons.

"Hey!" a man's voice called. "What'n blazes is goin' on around here, huh?"

SHE TRIPPED over a half buried rock and fell heavily..she was panting for breath now and she fought her way up to her knees when a pair of arms caught her again and imprisoned her, lifted her; she screamed and clawed her captor and he cursed and put her down and lashed out at her with his fist. The punch was a cruel one. It struck her squarely in the face and she sobbed and fell. Then as the man bent over her again she screamed:

"Kurt!"

The man dragged her to her feet. She fought him off again and he struck her a second time, a savage blow that felled her. He strode up to her, stood over her for a moment, then he bent down.

"Well?" he demanded. "Had enough?"

She stirred, groaned and he grunted.

"Come on," he commanded. "Get up to your feet an' stop whimperin'."

He lifted her to her feet, steadied her a bit; she kicked him suddenly, broke away from him and fled. He ran after her. She heard approaching hoofbeats and she ran faster, fighting all the while for her breath. The hoofbeats swelled.

"Kurt!" she screamed. "Kurt!"

A horseman rode out of the night he pulled his mount to a stop.

Katey's captor overtook her, caught her by the arm and spun her around, and slapped her across the face. Katey screamed and tried to pull away from him. He slapped her a second time, a third time. Other men ran up.

"That you, Hammond?" one man asked pantingly.

"It's him awright," another man said. "But what th' hell's th' matter with him? He gone loco or somethin'?"

Hammond held Katey by the arm; he turned and glared at the men.

"Get back t' your wagons," he said gruffly.

The men did not move.

"G'wan!" he screamed. Katey began to struggle again and he cuffed her soundly. "I'll break your damned neck, see if I don't!"

She butted him with her head and he lost his grip on her and she whirled away from him. The horseman swung himself out of the saddle. Katey flew toward him with Hammond in mad pursuit.

"Kurt!" she screamed again. "Kurt!"

There was an awakening bellow from the horseman; he rushed forward, caught Katey in his arms.

"Katrina, baby!"

"Papa!" Katey gasped and she clung to him then she began to sob again, brokenly and hysterically. "That man, he beat me!"

HAMMOND panted up, skidded to a stop; Kurt Heyrich spun Katey behind him. She went skidding over the grass, fell on her hands and knees. Kurt lunged for Hammond, grabbed him by the shirt-front, then holding him off at arm's length, he smashed Hammond in the face with a sledge-hammer fist. Hammond struggled to break Heyrich's grip but there was no escaping Kurt's fury. He battered Hammond savagely, ruthlessly, with every punch landing in Hammond's face with a sickening, crunching sound. Hammond finally collapsed, sagged against Kurt but the big man dragged him up and smashed him half a dozen furious times more, then he simply cast him aside. Hammond toppled over in a limp heap.

Katey was on her feet now. Kurt turned and strode up to her, took her in his arms again and held her tight.

There was a sudden yell.

"Look out!" a man shouted. "He's got a knife!"

Kurt pushed Katey away. He turned as Hammond, a knife gleaming in his upraised right hand, came careening over the grass. Kurt met him head-on. Hammond's right arm was suddenly thrust high over his head; there was a panting struggle for a moment, a crunching sound again and the knife fell out of Hammond's hand. The men who were watching saw Kurt seize Hammond in his arms, crush him to him, heard Kurt grunt, then they heard an agonizing scream from Hammond as his spinal cord snapped. Kurt released him and Hammond sagged brokenly to the ground. Kurt went back to Katey, lifted her in his arms, carried her to his horse and swung her up into the saddle as lightly as if she were a tiny child, then he climbed up behind her. Slowly they rode away into the night.

They had covered probably a mile when there was a sudden outburst of rifle fire from Hammond's train,

Kurt reined it, twisted around and looked back. Katey sat up too, then she suddenly pointed skyward. There was a sudden glow in the night sky, then flames climbed high into the blue. Kurt grunted.

"We will go on," he said and Katey sank down against him.

Slowly as before they rode steadily eastward. The roar of rifle fire swelled and faded, arose and died out, broke out anew only to slacken off again and finally, probably half an hour later, a deep, oppressive silence settled over the darkened range. Kurt did not look back again. Katey's head was bowed and nodding against his chest; gently he moved her, brought her closer to him. Her head slipped into the hollow of his left arm. After a while he bent over her.

"Katrina," he said softly.

There was no response. He was satisfied that Katey was asleep. His arm tightened around her.

WILL CARTER was standing near the Anderson wagon at the head of the train when Kurt Heyrich rode up.

"H'llo," Cather said and he strode over. He looked at the sleeping girl in the saddle in front of Kurt, then he looked up and smiled. "Found 'er awright, eh? Good thing. Your wife's just abut out've 'er mind with worry. She's been poppin' in and outta her wagon like a jack rabbit every time she thinks she hears hoofs."

Kurt said nothing.

"You see 'nything uv Bill Raines in your travels?" Cather asked.

"Yes," Kurt said. "We met on the range. He went on to Hammond's train."

"Uh-huh," Will said, nodding. "That's what I figgered he'd do once he knew your daughter was awright. Speakin' o' th' devil, how bad did Hammond catch it?"

"Bad," Kurt said quietly. "Very bad."

He nudged his horse with his knees and the animal moved slowly down the line of wagons. Cather turned, followed him with his eyes.

"Didn't like th' way he said that," he muttered. "Wish t' hell Bill'd get back so I'd know how bad very bad really is. That Heyrich's a queer bird. He'll never be accused o' talkin' too much. He coulda told me a heap but he clammed up an' rode away an' that was that."

He heard a step behind him and he turned around. Peggy Taylor came toward him from the Anderson wagon.

"S'matter?" he asked. "Couldn't you sleep?"

"No," she answered. "I've been twisting and turning all night long and I was afraid I'd wake Mrs. Anderson, so I got up and got dressed. When do you think Bill'd get back?"

"O-h, he oughta be along most any time now," Cather said. "How'd you know he'd gone?"

Peggy smiled.

"I'd know his horse without seeing him," she said. "He has a funny way of snorting, and lots of other funny mannerisms, and after a while it's easy to recognize him when he goes by."

"You shoulda put on somethin' over your dress," Will said. "It's blowin' up."

"O-h, I'm quite warm. Listen."

They turned as one toward the open range that spread away before them.

"I don't hear 'nything," Cather said.

Peggy was motionless.

"Oh, yes," she said presently. "Didn't you hear a snort? I will admit though it sounded more like a sneeze than a snort, but it's Bill all right."

"I sure hope so."

A SHADOWY horseman came riding out of the darkness, whirled up to the train, and jerked his mount to a stiff-legged stop when he saw the two figures standing beyond the first wagon.

"Hi, you two," he called. He swung himself out of the saddle, hitched up his pants, came striding up to them and looked at Peggy and frowned. "How come you ain't where you oughta be at this hour, huh?"

Peggy smiled up at him.

"I couldn't sleep."

"You couldn't, eh? I could sleep for a week!"

He chucked her under the chin.

"Look," Cather said. "I don't like t' bust this up, but if you don't mind, Bill, I'd sure like t' know how Hammond made out."

"Didn't Heyrich tell you?"

Will Cather snorted.

"He didn't tell me one doggoned thing. When I asked him how bad Hammond caught it, all he said was 'Bad. Very bad.' How bad is very bad, Bill, in terms o' people an' things, say like wagons, huh?"

"In th' case o' Hammond's outfit, sixteen wagons an' twenty-one people, half o' th'm women an' kids," Raines said quietly. "McBride really gave it to th'm this time."

"An' how," Cather said grimly. "Looks like he's gonna follow us clear into California. Damn that Hammond! I oughta break his fool neck f'r talkin' those folks into followin' him."

"You c'n forget about Hammond."

"Y'mean they've given him th' boot?"

"Hammon's dead."

Cather's head jerked up.

"Oh," he said. "Dead, eh?"

"Yep. On'y it wasn't McBride who did it. It was Kurt Heyrich."

Peggy caught her breath. Cather simply stared at him.

"Heyrich?" he repeated. "How—how come?"

"It isn't a pretty story," Raines said. "So you c'n do without th' details f'r now."

"H'm," Cather mused. "Heydrich, eh? Now that I think uv it, he's a big man awright. Big enough t' take on a grizzly. Musta had a danged good reason if he went t' work on Hammond."

"You get a look at Katey?" Raines asked.

"She was asleep when I saw 'er," Cather answered. "Heyrich had 'er up in front o' him. Her nead was down against his chest an' his arm was around 'er. But why'd you ask? Was there somethin' th' matter with 'er?"

"Plenty."

"We-ll, why'n blazes didn't Heyrich say so?" Cather retorted. "I'm supposed t' be in charge here an' when anything happens t' anybody, I'm supposed t' be told about it. I better go see that Dutchm'n an' find out what he's hidin' fr'm me."

Raines shook his head.

"I wouldn't, Will," he said.

"Why not?" Cather demanded.

"Leave th'm alone f'r now. You'll have plenty o' chance t' talk with th'm t'morrow. Besides, there isn't anything you or anyone else c'n do f'r them."

"We-ll...."

"Look, I told Hammond's people t' stay put an' that we'd push on t'night an' that when we come along they c'n join up with us again. We oughta get goin'."

"Yeah, I suppose we'd better."

"I'll ride down an' get things started. You take care o' things up at this end."

"Bill," Peggy said.

"Yeah?"

"Perhaps I can do something for Katey. You don't think they'll resent me, do you?"

Raines shrugged his shoulder.

"I dunno. But if you don't mind tryin', it might be just th' thing. Go 'head. I'll look in on you later on."

Peggy went marching down the line.

"I'm goin'," Raines said to Cather.

He wheeled his horse and rode away.

THE FIRST Heyrich wagon was thoroughly darkened when Peggy came abreast of it; she stopped, looked up at it and considered for a moment, then she decided to try the second wagon. She went on, came up to it and looked up, A ray of lamplight seeped through the canvas drop. There was a big shadowy figure on the driver's seat.

"Mr. Heyrich," she called softly.

There was a movement on the wide seat.

"Y-es?"

"May I talk with you for a moment, please?"

Kurt moved down the seat, swung himself over the high wheel and climbed down.

"Is there anything I can do?" Peggy asked.

Kurt looked at her. He was big and yet there was helplessness in the slope of his big shoulders.

"Is she asleep?" Peggy asked.

He shook his head.

"No. She lays there but she does not sleep."

"And Mrs. Heyrich? Is she with Katey?"

Kurt shook his head again.

"Katey does not want her."

"Do you think she'd mind if I came in and sat with her?" Peggy asked. "Perhaps then she'd feel better, even doze off."

"You are very kind," Kurt said.

Peggy smiled up at him. She stepped past him to the wagon, climbed up over the wheel, slid over the driver's seat, dropped down into the wagon lightly, lifted an end of the curtain, flipped it back and stepped inside. The curtain swung back into place behind her. A lantern that hung from an overhead stave furnished the light, a yellowish and eerie light. Against a side wall of the wagon lay a blanketed figure, its face to the wall. Peggy tiptoed forward, peered down for a moment, then she dropped to her knees beside the girl.

"Katey," she said softly.

Katey turned slowly. Peggy gasped inwardly when she saw the girl's face. It was battered and swollen. One eye, the left one, was almost closed, and her lips were bruised and puffed. Peggy steeled herself. She smiled down at her.

"Is there anything you'd like?" she asked.

Katey's lips formed a single word.

"No."

"A drink of water perhaps?"

"No, nothing, thank you."

Peggy bent over her, tucked in a strand of hair.

"Your hair is beautiful," she said. "It's like pure gold. If you won't let me get you anything, won't you please try to sleep?"

"I don't want to sleep."

"But you ought to try."

Katey did not answer.

"I'll be right back," Peggy said. She arose and went out. "Mr. Heydrich."

The tall figure standing near the wheel turned.

"I'll need some water, please," Peggy said. "And a good sized piece of white cloth. A towel or an old shirt will do.,"

"I will get them," Kurt said.

"O-h, yes. Have you any vinegar?"

"In the wagon. In a big bottle in the corner."

"Fine. Now will you get me the water and the cloth, please?"

"Right away. Katey..she is all right?"

"Of course," Peggy answered assuringly. "In a couple of day's times, she'll be herself again. I can promise you that, Mr. Heydrich. Right now the best thing for her is sleep and I think that once I get some cold vinegar compresses on her they'll soothe her and help her doze off."

"You are a fine girl."

"Thank you. And when Katey's herself again, I think we're going to be awf'lly good friends."

"That I will like very much."

THE TRAIN was on the move when Bill Raines rode up alongside the first of the Heydrich wagons and looked up at the figure on the driver's seat.

"Hey, that you up there, Peggy?"

Peggy laughed.

"Yes. And this is the laziest team of mules I've ever driven."

"Give 'em time. They're slow starters, y'know. They'll pick up as they go along. Mules are like that, allus have been an' chances are, allus will be."

"They'd better show some signs of life in a hurry," Peggy retorted. "Or I'll wake them up with this whip."

"Hey, how come you're drivin' this wagon?"

"Someone had to. They tell me mules won't go unless they're driven."

"No foolin? Seems like someone's allus comin' up with somethin' new. No tellin' what it'll be next. S-say, where's th' Madam?"

"She's busy."

"Doin' what? Sleepin', while you are drivin'?"

"Mama Heydrich is taking care of her daughter."

"O-h, yeah? Then things've changed since I was talkin' t' Papa Heydrich a little while back. He told me you were nurse maidin' Katey an' that Katey didn't want 'ny part o' her mother. How come th' change? I don't suppose you had 'nything t' do with that, did you?"

"A little, I suppose. After I made Katey comfortable it wasn't hard to talk her into forgiving her mother and letting her take over for me."

"You're awright."

"Thank you, Mr. Raines. Thank you very much."

"O-h, that's awright," Bill said lightly. He rode alongside the wagon for another minute, suddenly swung his horse closer to it, swung out of the saddle, stepped lightly on the shaft and then up on the seat beside Peggy. He grinned at her. "Haven't had much time f'r you lately. Seems like there's allus somethin' f'r me t' do. An' when things quiet down; an' I get a breather, it's night an' you have turned in."

There was no comment from Peggy.

"Been missin' me a little?"

"A little," Peggy said airily.

"I think o' you all th' time."

Peggy said nothing.

"At night when it's so quiet an' dark an' I'm ridin' along somehow I allus find myself turnin' an' lookin' at the Anderson wagon, knowin' you are asleep in it, an' wonderin' if you are dreamin' an' if it's ever about me."

The mules plodded along and the lines slackened a bit in Peggy's hands as she relaxed. Bill's arm came around her, tightened, brought her a little closer to him. He cupped her chin in his free hand, bent his head and kissed her gently on the mouth.

"Maybe I've never told you this before or said it right out," he said. "But I love you. That kiss'll help you r'member it."

He released her and got to his feet, turned and jumped down. His horse trotted up and Bill vaulted up into the saddle, spurred his mount and rode swiftly away.

7

Another Day

IT WAS the middle of the morning when they came in sight of the waiting wagon train. There seemed to be little activity in the train, with scarcely a dozen persons moving about. There were burned-out hulks of wagons at different points along the line, and Cather, riding at the head of his party with Raines, shook his head.

"God," he said. "Lookit that. It does somethin' t' me t' see what's happened t' decent people who come out here with their hopes ridin' high on'y, t' have a hellion like that McBride slaughter 'em."

"Yep," Raines said heavily. "I wish t' hell I'da plugged 'im 'stead o' lettin' him go."

"I've said that a million times since that day," Cather said bitterly. "An' I'll probably go right on sayin' it as long as I know he's still alive."

They nudged their horses and sent them bounding away, checked them again and slowed them to a walk when they rode in among the halted wagons. Grim, lined, bitter faces looked at them from the wagons. A single horseman with his rifle cradles in his arms rode forward to meet them, nodded to them as he came up to them and reined in.

"All set t' move out?" Cather asked.

"All set," the man answered. "We buried our dead at dawn an' we've been waitin' around f'r you ever since."

They wheeled their mounts, backed them in between two wagons as the first of Cather's wagons rumbled up. It was the Anderson wagon and Mary Anderson was alone on the driver's seat. John Anderson came riding up at that moment, clattered past the wagon and rode the length of the Hammond train, then he pulled up, wheeled and waited for his wife to come on. Cather's wag-

ons followed one behind the other, then he rode out with Raines and the rifleman.

"Awright, folks," Cather called. "Fall in one at a time b'hind us, then when we're in th' clear, make it a double time same's usual. Let's go!"

Dust began to rise as the mules began to move again and the big wheels crunched dirt and spewed it upward. There were the usual squeaks as sun-warped wagons and harness and shafts jolted into movement. Presently the two trains were joined. Cather, waiting at the head of the line, halted the train.

"Awright," he yelled through cupped hands. "You folks in th' wagon with th' busted top..c'mon, pull outta line an' come up here. Th' folks b'hind you follor right b'hind. C'mon!"

IT WAS a matter of ten minutes before the double line was formed, then with Cather and Raines riding ahead of the train, John Anderson just ahead of his own wagon, and the rifle-armed horseman about midway down the line, the train moved westward again. The country ahead was a smooth carpet of rich green, a level tableland that stretched away as far as the eye could see.

"Bill," Cather said, shading his eyes with his hand. "Think we're still in Wyoming?"

"Nope," Raines answered. "I think we've been out've it f'r days. This is Utah, 'less I'm mistaken, th' northern part uv it. Th' way I figger it, a couple o' more days an' we'll be hittin' th' Nevada line, an' then we turn south."

"How far south?"

"Can't tell you 'till we come t' th' place where we swing westward again. But I'll know th' place once I see it."

Cather lasped into silence again. After a while Bill turned to him.

"Gonna use guards an' fires tonight?" he asked.

"They worked awright th' last time, didn't they?" Cather replied. "Sure we'll use th'm t'night an' every night, longs we're out on th' range. S-say, where are those Mormon villages I've heard about? We passin' 'em?"

"Yep, purposely."

"Why?"

"Last time I came through Utah, there was a heap o' bad feelin' between th' Mormons an' th' Gentiles with each burnin' an' shootin' down th other an' each passin' th' blame to th' other. Long's we've got enough supplies t' feed ourselves 'till we hit a regular town, I figured it'd be smart t' stay th' hell away fr'm th' Mormons. Not that I ever had 'ny trouble with th'm. I didn't an' f'r my dough they're awright long's you don't try 'ny tricks on th'm. But when they're sore, one Gentile's th' same t' them as another an' they might not give us a chance t' show th'm that we ain't here t' put 'nything over on th'm."

Cather nodded understandingly.

"Will," Raines said again.

"Yeah?"

"Think it'd be awright f'r me t' take about ten men t'night an' go ridin'?"

"Ridin' or lookin' f'r somethin'?"

Raines looked at him and grinned.

"I got 'n idea, young feller, that you've been mullin' over somethin' I've had in mind for a spell. Figgerin' on scoutin' around under cover o' darkness in hopes o' spottin' McBride's camp an' carryin' th' fightin' t' him?"

"That's about th' size uv it."

Cather grunted.

"I don't want 'ny family men with me," Raines went on. "We might run into more'n we c'n handle an' if we hafta fight our way out've it, I don't wanna be bothered worryin' about leavin' some more families without their men folk."

"Thanks t' McBride," Cather said, "we've got more'n ten men without families, so you ought'nta have any trouble pickin' out th' number you want. I wish t' hell I could leave someb'dy in charge here an' go along with you. That'd be one ride I'd enjoy, even if I didn't come back from it. I'd make damn sure that if I had t' cash in that some o' McBride's killers came along t' keep me company."

"We mightn't find th'm, y'know."

Cather smiled grimly.

"O-h, you'll find th'm awright," he retorted. "I'm damn sure you will. And when you do, boy, give th'm a lead blastin'."

"Leave that to us, Will. All I'm askin' for is a whack at them."

THE HOURS passed slowly, but finally it was noon.

"We'll give th'm a chance t' eat," Cather said, wheeled his horse. "Come on, Bill."

Together they rode back, halted the train. Cather stood up in his stirrups.

"Awright everybody," he called. "Half 'n hour t' eat. Hustle it now."

They walked their horses back to the Anderson wagon. Mary Anderson had just climbed down from the driver's seat.

"Well?" she demanded of Cather.

He looked at her.

"Huh?"

"You said half an hour, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"And you said for us to hustle it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"If you expect to have some coffee to wash down whatever I can manage to get together, you'd better hustle yourself off that horse and get around to the back of the wagon and fetch me the coffee pot."

Cather grinned sheepishly.

"Y'see that, Bill?" he said turning to Raines. "All y'gotta do is be nice to a woman an' that's all, brother. Fr'm then on she owns yuh." He looked at Mrs. Anderson again. "How d'you know I want coffee, huh, doggone it?"

"I don't," Mrs. Anderson retorted. "But I know that I do and I'm sure John does. So get the pot."

"See what I mean, Bill?" Cather asked.

Raines wheeled his horse.

"Hey," Cather demanded. "Where d'you think you're goin'?"

"Gonna see how Peggy's makin' out," the youth answered.

Cather frowned.

"Here I'm showin' you what happened t' me but that ain't enough f'r you. You're one o' them fellers who hafta learn things th' hard way. You can't profit fr'm someb'dy else's experience."

Raines laughed and rode down the line.

"Sucker!" Cather yelled after him. "Sucker!"

Mary Anderson eyed Cather sternly.

"Will Cather!" she said.

Their eyes met for a moment, Cather's wavered finally. He muttered something that sounded a lot like, 'Women, doggone 'em!', then he hoisted himself out of the saddle, hitched up his pants, shook his head and trudged around the wagon to the rear. Mary Anderson simply smiled.

PEGGY Taylor was alone on the driver's seat of Anna Heydrich's wagon, her arms folded on her drawn-up knees and her chin resting on her arms. Bill Raines rode up, looked at her for a moment, then he dismounted.

"You're supposed t' be havin' a quick bite to eat," he said. "Or don't you go in f'r eating?"

Peggy raised her heaad.

"Oh," she said.

He climbed up and seated himself beside her.

"I'm not particularly hungry," she said.

He crossed his long legs, thrust them out in front of him, rested his feet on the back of a mule. The animal turned his head and looked at Bill.

"Well?" Bill demanded. The mule turned his head away. "What were youy thinkin' about so hard?"

"O-h, lots of things."

"For instance?"

"Bill, do you think we'll ever see California?"

"Course we will! What ever gave you th' idea we wouldn't?"

"McBride," she said simply.

"McBride or no McBride, we'll still get there," he said doggedly.

"All of us, Bill?"

"Maybe not all uv us," he replied. "But you c'n bet on it, there'll still be plenty uv us left when we ride

over that California line. McBride ain't gonna beat us or stop us. He might raise even more hell with us than he's done a'ready, but he won't kill us all off."

"It frightens me," Peggy said. "Every morning there are fewer people left alive and fewer wagons untouched. That's daily. How long can we go like that, losing people and wagons so steadily? We're still a long way from California, weeks, perhaps even months. Then I get to thinking that perhaps none of us will ever get through."

"Don't think things like that," he said sternly. She bit her lower lip and he moved a bit closer to her. "Look, Peg. We're gonna be awright. I know we are. S-ay, did I ever tell you 'bout our place?"

She shook her head.

"Then you've got somethin' to look forward to. It's a valley. Just about th' most beautiful place you ever saw. And flowers? Every kind you ever heard tell uv an' they're there in th' millions. An' th' sun isn't like any other sun. O-h, it's bright an' warm awright, but what makes it different is that it doesn't burn right through you like this one does. It makes everything look so alive an' happy, even makes you glad you're alive. Even th' ground in California is different. It's so doggoned rich, anything c'n grow in it, once it takes root. Y'know I'll bet you c'n plant pebbles an' come up with a regular stone plant. That's how good it is."

SHE HAD raised her head higher, listening, drinking in every word he was saying.

"Our house out there is somethin'," he continued. "It's big an' roomy an' comf'table. You'll like it same's I did. Y'know how some houses smell so damp an' musty as if they needed a heck uva lot o' sunshine t' be run through th'm? Ours don't smell like that. It smells good, just like someone's been bakin' there. An trees? Heck, California's famous f'r trees. We've got a heap uv 'em, big an' little ones. I like the evenings out there best uv all. There's allus a nice little coolin' breeze, soft an' gentle-like, an' when you're sittin' out there under th' stars an' you hear it whisperin' to the grass an' th' flowers, golly it does somethin' to you. You feel so good all over, like you never felt before. The breeze kinda carries th' smell fr'm th' flowers right up to you an' drapes it all over you an' you get th' smell in your lungs, way down inside o' you, in your hair, all over you, an' there's nothing to come up to it."

He reached over, took her hand in his.

"When I get talkin' about California," he said lightly, "there's no shuttin' me up. That's one thing I like to talk about. When you see it f'r y'self, you'll say it's everything I said it was an' then some. Anyway, 'till we get there, you've gotta keep your chin up an' keep tellin' y'self that we're gonna get there an' no two ways about it."

"But, Bill, suppose..."

"Yeah? Whyn't you finish? Suppose what?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing, Bill. Forget it, please."

"I think I know what you were there, meanin' you, Peg, an' I don't?'. Right?"

"Please, Bill."

He looked down at her hand in his.

"Peg, if I didn't have 'ny ranch, if I didn't have 'nything 'cept what I got on me, would you still be willing t' marry me?" he asked.

"I'd marry you, Bill," she said simply, "if we had nothing and if we had to walk the rest of the way to California. And when we got there and we had to sleep under a tree and keep house in the wide open spaces, I'd still feel that I had done well for myself."

He looked at her and smiled.

"Thanks, Peg," he said. "That was swell." He released her hand and got to his feet. "You stay put here. I'll be back in a minute."

"But where are you going? It isn't half an hour yet, is it?"

"Nope," he said. "I gotta go see a man about somethin' awf'lly important but it won't take more'n a minute, then I'll be back."

"We-ll, if it's so terribly urgent, all right, but..."

He bent swiftly and kissed the tip of her nose. He vaulted over the wheel, landed on the ground lightly and ran up the line of wagons..his horse, idling close by, started after him, pulled up alongside of him and ran along with him. The Andersons and Will Cather were sitting cross-legged in the grass near their wagons; they had finished eating and now they were relaxing. They looked up quickly when Bill and his horse came up to them.

"S'matter?" Cather demanded.

"Nothing f'r you t' get excited about," Raines answered. "Just wanna ask you somethin'."

Cather grunted and relaxed again.

"Will, you're head man 'round here. You read a funeral service when we hafta have one an' things like that. Now suppose someb'dy wanted t' get married? Could you marry th'm?"

CATHER scratched his nose with his thumb nail.

"I dunno, Bill," he said finally. He turned to the Andersons. "What d'you think, Mary? Think it'd be awright?"

"I dont see why it wouldn't be all right," Mary Anderson answered promptly.

"There y'are, Bill,' Cather said. "Mary usu'lly knows what's what."

"Swell," Raines said.

"Wait a minute," Cather said. "Who are you askin' for? Who's this someb'dy who's in such a helluva sweat t' get hitched that they can't wait 'till we get t' California..huh?"

Mary Anderson smiled.

"Never mind, Will," she said. "Just tuck in your shirt while I go and get the bible. And Bill..."

"Yeah?"

"Tell Peggy to wait there for me. I'll be along directly. John, put the dishes away, please."

Peggy was sitting at the very end of the seat when Bill came racing back..she moved back quickly to make room for him beside her. He was panting now and his eyes were alight.

"Look," he said. "I got th' right, or leastways I'm takin' th' right t' look out f'r you. If I ain't alive, at least I'll know you're set an' that you'll have a home and money. I just asked Will Cather t' marry us. That awright with you?"

"You mean..now?"

He nodded vigorously.

"Right now."

She smiled gently.

"I'm ready, Bill, whenever you are."

He turned, jumped down to the ground, turned again and held up his arms. She came to him readily and he lifted her easily, lightly, and put her down on the ground. She touched her hair, smoothed down her skirt. while he watched.

"Do I look all right?"

"You look good enough to eat," he said. "O-h, yeah. Mrs. Anderson said f'r you t' wait here. She'll be along d'rectly."

"Where will you be?"

"Waitin' for you, with Cather an' Anderson," he replied. He looked at her closely. "Peg, you won't be nervous, will you, an' cry?"

She smiled up at him.

"No, Bill, I won't."

"Good girl," he said. "O-h, here she comes now. Be seein' you."

CATHER, Anderson and Raines were standing together, hatless and a bit awkward when Mrs. Anderson and Peggy came up to them. Cather, the bible in his hand and his big thumb holding it open at the page he was to read from, cleared his throat.

"Bill," Mrs. Anderson said. "Stand next to Peggy. John, you stand behind Bill. All right, Will. You're supposed to face Bill and Peggy, you know. That's it."

Cather opened the bible.

"Awright,' he said. he raised his eyes and looked at Peggy for a moment, lowered them again, shook his head. "Beats me how some fellers c'n go outta their way lookin' f'r trouble."

"Will!" Mary Anderson said and her husband laughed.

Cather frowned, cleared his throat again.

"Awright now," he said. He read a couple of lines of the marriage service to himself, his lips forming the words, then he frowned, and suddenly jerked his head up. "Doggone it, Mary, th' print's so blamed small, I can't barely make it out. Look, suppose you folks just lemme make it up as we go along? Awright?"

"We-ll, all right," Mary Anderson said begrudingly. "But mind you, Will Cather, this is a marriage service you're officiating at, not a christening or a funeral."

Cather closed the bible, put it in his left hand.

"Awright," he said for the third time. "Lord, we're askin' you to witness this wedding. Th' young people are Bill Raines and Peggy Taylor. Anybody got 'nything t' say why they shouldn't be married to each other?"

A handful of other people had appeared, and now they came a bit closer; they stopped when Cather looked at them and shook his head.

"You, Bill Raines, d'you take Peggy Taylor for your lawful wife, for better or for worse, in health an' in sickness, for richer or poorer, 'till death do you part?"

"I do," Bill said.

"An' you, Peggy Taylor, d'you take this man for your lawful husband, for better or for worse, in health and in sickness, for richer or f'r poorer, to love, honor and obey 'till death do you part?"

"I do."

Cather grunted.

"Take 'er hand, Bill," he commanded.

"The left one," Mary Anderson said.

"Ain'tcha got a ring?" Cather asked.

"Of course he has," Mrs. Anderson said. "John's holding it for him."

"Huh?" John Anderson said. "What d'you mean I'm holdin' it? When'd I get it, an' who'd I get it from?"

"O-h, dear," his wife said. "I've still got it and I thought I'd given it to you. Take it, John, and give it to Bill please."

The ring. a simple gold band, was passed to Bill who looked at it, then he raised his eyes to meet Peggy's.

"It was my mother's," she said.

"Oh."

"Come on," Cather commanded. "Let's get this bus'ness over with. This is your last chance t' back outta this thing, Bill, b'fore I pr'nounce th' fatal words. What d'you say?"

"Will Cather, I must say..."

Cather grinned.

"I was on'y foolin', Mary," he said. "Bill don't wanna back outta this way more'n Peggy does." He looked very solemn now. "Bill Raines an' Peggy Taylor, I pronounce you man an' wife. Bill, put th' ring on 'er finger, kiss 'er an that'll be that. You others hustle back t' your wagons so's we c'n pull outta here soon's these two love birds are set t' go. Go, 'head, will yuh, folks?'

THE NIGHT was dark and chilly. The train was shrouded in shadowy darkness and deep, sleepy silence save for an occasional milling about of one team of tied-up mules that seemed unable to settle down for the night. They bumped one another, crowded against each other, then curiously enough, suddenly subsided and huddle together again only to suddenly back away from the big rear wheels as far as their tethering lines permitted, kicking and trampling one another, then ceasing their antics abruptly and coming together again.

Fifty feet away camp fires crackled and shadowy figures with rifles cradled in their arms kept watch and probed the darkness beyond their fires with keen eyes.

A single figure tramped up and down wearily at the head of the train, it was Will Cather. He turned quickly when he heard a step behind him. Then a tall, lithe figure of a man came toward him.

"Hey," Cather said in surprise. "What'n blazes are you doin' up, huh?"

Bill Raines, his holstered Colt thumping against his right thigh, came up to him.

"I got somethin' to do," he said. "Remember?"

"Aw, f'rget it f'r tonight. This is one night you oughtn'ta be thinkin' about anything but your..."

"I know," the tall youth interrupted. "Peggy knows I've got somethin' t' do an' she ain't th' kind to expect me t' lay down on th' job. Anyway she's asleep, so th' sooner I get started, th' sooner I'll be back."

"We-ll, if that's th' way you want it..."

"Will, kinda keep 'n eye on Peggy, will yuh?"

"Sure, son. Don't you worry none 'bout her. She'll be awright, You just watch your own step, get it?"

"You got them papers I gave you? Th' deeds t' that ranch o' mine?"

"They're in safe hands. Mary Anderson. Look, you got your men all set?'

"They're prob'bly waitin' f'r me now. We-ll, see you later, Will."

"I'll be around," Cather answered.

Raines turned on his heel and strode down the line of wagons, He stopped beside one wagon for a minute, disappeared around it briefly; when he reappeared he was leading his horse. He vaulted into the saddle and rode away. Far down the line other horsemen appeared and rode forward to meet Raines, then they guided their mounts in between the wagons and rode onto the shadowy range. For a minute or two Cather could hear the hoofbeats of their horses, then the clatter lessened and finally died out altogether.

"Wish t' hell I was with th'm," Cather muttered. "I'd give a heap t' be there if Bill runs into that hellion, McBride. There'll be hell t' pay if that happens, I'll betcha."

8

McBride Learns About Ghosts

RAINES twisted around and looked back at the troop of men strung out behind him in single file. He dropped down again presently, settled himself in his saddle, suddenly jerked his horse to a stop, whirled the startled animal around as the other horsemen came crowding up to him.

"Hold it a minute!" he called. "There's somethin' cockeyed 'round here. We started out with eleven men all told, an' all uva sudden there are twelve uv us."

The men reined in. Raines swerved his horse away from the others, cut over and pulled up in the path of the last man who was just riding up.

"Just a minute, Mister," he said. "Who are you an' who invited you along on this party?"

The man laughed. "Funny thing, y'know?" he said. "I was out exercisin' my horse an' all uva sudden you fellers come past me an' I got th' idea that I might as well have comp'ny on my ride so I just fell in b'hind you an' kinda tagged along. Hope I ain't buttin' in on anything."

Raines inched his horse up close to the other's mount. He peered hard at the man for a monent.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Thought there was somethin' f'miliar 'bout your voice. What's th' idea, Howell?"

"T' tell you th' truth, Raines, I overheard some o' th' boys talkin' 'bout goin' callin' on McBride tonight an' we-ll, I didn't wanna be left out've it. But b'fore you say 'nything, lemme say somethin' I've been meanin' t' say t' you on'y every time I go lookin' for you t' say it, you ain't around. Thanks for fishin' me outta that burnin' wagon."

"Forget it," Raines said. "You awright now?"

"Lemme go along an' you'll see."

"Looks like we're gonna hafta let you. On'y there's one thing you've gotta promise me."

"Awright. What is it?"

"You've got a family t' think about. Don't take 'ny chances no matter what we get into."

"It's a deal."

Raines wheeled his horse away, loped to the head of the party.

"Let's go," he called over his shoulder. "An' stick close together."

THE TROOP reformed and fell in behind Raines as before. The range grass was thick and it muffled their horses' hoof beats. They rode southward steadily, a strung-out

line of shadowy men and horses who seemed to lose their identity in the deep night light. A rider came spurring up, ranged himself alongside of Raines who looked at him. It was Howell again.

"Awright f'r me to ask what you're plannin' t' do?" the man asked.

"Sure," Raines answered. "Kinda figgered we'd ride south for a spell, then if we didn't see 'nything, we'd swing in a circle an' head north again. That way we c'n cover a lot o' ground."

"Uh-huh. How d'you figger this McBride feller?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Think he holes up somewhere's an' kinda works outta there?"

"Hell, no. He's getta keep movin' th' same way th' train does, so I figger he makes camp an' lays low till it gets dark, an' then he rides out an' takes his whack at us. When he gets finished, he just turns around an' hightails it back to camp, gets his sleep an' moves on again in the morning'. 'Course he's smart enough t' keep far away fr'm us during th' day so's t' make sure we don' spot him. But you c'n bet on it, Howell, he don't hole up. He's on th' move all th' time."

"Yeah, guess that's so."

"I'm just hopin' that we c'n find his camp, sneak up on 'im an' take a whack at him before he heads his outfit toward th' train."

"Gonna try t' hit him an' hurt him so's he won't be able t' do any hittin' of his own."

"That's th' general idea. Now all we gotta do is find him."

They rode along in silence for a time. Finally, Raines checked his horse....Howell looked at him quickly.

"See somethin'?" he asked.

"Nope. Think we'll start swingin' around now. We've come far enough f'r tonight."

They slowed their mounts to a trot. The other men rode up to them, looked at Raines questioningly.

"We're turnin' around," Raines announced. "We'll hafta hope we run into somethin' on th' way back. Watch y'selves now."

They rode westward, not directly but in a swinging arc. The night wind stiffened a bit and swept dirt into their horses' faces. Here and there a protesting horse shied out of line but after a brief tussle the line was reformed and they went on. Presently they were riding directly north. There was no conversation, no sound, nothing save an occasional creaking of saddle leather and then it was usually short-lived. Raines and Howell pulled their horses to a sudden stop and looked at each other.

"There they are," they said together. Raines turned quickly. "Hold it! Walk your horses up here!"

The other men came up to them quickly.

"What is it?" one man asked.

"McBride," another answered simply.

"Oh," the first man said.

FAR AHEAD of them they could see a camp fire burning brightly against a background of dark night. Sparks spun upward, darted across the sky but their flight seemed unuually short; they dissolved into nothingness after a short climb.

"Good thing f'r us th' grass out here's so damned thick," Howel muttered. "Or they'da heard us comin' an' then we'da have had one hell uva swell shindig."

"What'd we do now?" someone asked.

"What d'you think?" another man retorted. "We came out here lookin' for th'm, an' now that we've found th'm we're gonna take a whack at th'm uv course!"

"Save th' talk for later," Raines said. "Get down off your horses."

The men dismounted.

"Take your rifles," Raines said. "You'll need th'm."

Rifles were jerked out of saddle boots.

"Kneel down around me," Raines said. "That's it. Now look. We're goin' in for a fight, a quick one, just a couple o' shots, then we're gonna hightail it away fr'm here just as fast as we can. 'Course it won't do 'ny harm if you make every shot count. The more we knock off, th' more o' our lives an' th' other folks we'll save. Every man's gonna take his horse

with him. On'y you're gonna lead your horses, not ride th'm. Half o' you'll go one way, half th' other way. Howell'll tag along with me. We'll hit th'm fr'm th' center."

"Swell," Howell said.

"Circle around," Raines continued. "Pick a spot an' leave your horse there, then creep forward on your hands an' knees to say about thirty feet from th' fire. Got that? Pick th' man you're gonna shoot at, an' when I give th' word, let 'em have it but good. When I holler, get th' hell out again, hop on your horse an' ride like hell. We'll meet north o' here unless somethin happens to us, an' then it'll be every man for himself. Any questions?"

"I got one," a man said. "How 'bout two quick shots f'r a signal t' begin shootin' an' two more f'r us t' backtrack an' hightail it? If there's any excitement, sure as shootin' we won't be able t' hear your holler."

"Awright," Raines sid. "Two shots t' shoot an' two more t' quit. Get goin' an' don't take too long getting set."

The men started away. Raines and Howell, squatting in the grass, watched them, saw them start to swing in a circle as he had instructed.

"Come on," Raines said presently.

"Right with you."

They crawled forward slowly, delaying their advance in order to give the other men sufficient time to reach their positions. They took advantage of the brief delay to raise their heads for a quick look at the camp ahead of them.

"Look," Howell said. "Off to th' left o' th' fire. Lookit them horses! Must be forty or maybe fifty o' them!"

"Uh-huh," Raines said. "So far I've counted more'n twenty men layin' around th' fire. Then there's a bunch o' th'm near th' horses."

"I see th'm," Howell grunted. "Looks like McBride's got himself a regular army."

They burrowed deeper into the grass and crawled ahead.

"Wait up," Howell whispered. "I got a small bunch o' faggots. Some-b'dy musta dropped th'm here."

"Uh-huh."

"Y'know," Howell whispered, "if we could light th'm an' chuck 'em in among those horses, we'd sure raise hell with th'm."

"Wouldn't we though!"

"Got 'ny ideas?"

"One idea," Raines whispered back. "How many faggots you got?"

"O-h, six or maybe eight. Why?"

"If you could light 'em all at once time an' chuck 'em one after the other, I could cover you an' open up on th'm."

"Yeah, but lemme throw 'em first." Howell twisted a bit, grunted, an indication that he had found what he had sought..a tiny light sputtered in his hands and promptly went out.

"Try it again."

A second light flamed, sputtered and suddenly crackled.

"That did it!" Howell whispered excitedly.

"Give it a minute t' start burnin'!" Raines said.

Howell got up on his knees.

"Here we go!"

HIS RIGHT arm jerked backward. A flaming faggot streaked through the darkness and dropped squarely in the middle of a compactly-bunched group of horses. There was a cry of fright and they reared up, backed and lashed out with their hoofs at the burning branch that lay in the grass at their very feet; a second faggot came hurtling overhead, struck one of the horses a glancing blow, caromed off his back and fell sputtering beside him. The badly frightened animal whirled and fled; the other horses followed suit.

A couple of men sought to halt them by running out in front of them and waving their arms vigorously, but they were brushed aside. One man lunged for the bridle of a big white horse. He missed and went sprawling on his face. He tried to roll out of the path of an onrushing horse when still another horse came pounding down upon him. The man disappeared beneath a flurry of flashing hoofs.

Other men ran up and tried to calm the rest of the horses; they had almost succeeded in quieting them

down when a third and fourth faggot fell among them. The panicky animals trampled the men, fought to get away, finally broke their tethering lines and like a herd of stampeding steers, swept everything before them as they bolted away. Some of the horses ran a short distance, stopped and came trotting back; when the last of the faggots fell near them, they wheeled and darted off again.

There were scattered shots from some of McBride's men who were just as badly shaken as the horses; they fired wildly, this way and that; now Raines' Colt roared twice and there was an immediate echo. Ten rifles thundered a volley and raiders fell before the blast of gunfire.

The rifles thundered a second time and more men fell. One man pitched forward directly into the camp fire; another man grabbed him by the boot heels and dragged him out, straightened up, jerked out his gun, raised it when a bullet hit him. He tottered, sagged and fell in a heap. Another man ran up and backed away choking. A rifle bullet struck him and he clutched at his chest; he turned slowly, plodded away when a second bullet hit him. He fell down, forced himself up, started off again when his legs gave way beneath him and he fell a second time.

Now rifle-armed men sprawled in the grass and fired at the flashes of the attackers' rifles. The thunder of gunfire was deafening. Now too some of the horses returned; they came loping back, circled the camp, and some of them stopped squarely between the attackers and the attacked. Raines and Howell, sprawled out in the grass, halted their fire for a moment.

"I think we oughta get goin'," Raines said.

"Aw, take it easy," Howell pleaded. "We're doin' awright, so why spoil th' fun?"

"We-ll," Raines said, then he grabbed Howell's arm. "Back up!" he yelled.

A BAND OF mounted men came out of nowhere, headed directly for them. Raines and Howell scrambled to their feet, wheeled and snapped a couple of discouraging shots. A man fell off his horse and a second rider slumped forward in his saddle, then he slipped out and toppled into the grass. The riderless horses stopped, turned and trotted back. A bullet ploughed the ground at Raines' feet; another bullet whined by Howell's head and he simply hurled himself the other way, fell awkwardly, scrambled to his feet again, cursing and shooting in a blind rage. Bullets fell all around them and Howell, forgetting himself completely, stood his ground, emptied his gun at the oncoming horsemen. Raines dragged him away. They reached their horses, got up on them somehow, dug their heels into their flanks and sent them bounding away. A single horseman came into view ahead of them. Raines fired twice and the man was lifted out of the saddle and hurled earthward.

There was some shooting ahead of them and they could see shadowy figures astride horses, but there was too much gunsmoke and too much confusion, so they swerved away and rode eastward for a time. Their horses seemed just as anxious as they were to put distance between McBride and themselves and they flashed over the ground at a break-neck pace. Finally they found themselves far removed from the camp; the range was hushed and they slowed their horses to a trot.

"Hope th' boys made it outta there awright," Raines said.

"They musta," Howell said. Then he laughed. "Hey, we sure raised hell with th'm, didn't we?"

"Yep. Seemed t' me I could see McBride's men fallin' all over th' place. Wonder how many we actu'lly got?"

"Dunno. All I know is that I got four or five f'r sure an' three or four who looked like they were hit real bad. You musta got even more'n I did."

THEY RODE westward now and after they had covered a couple of miles, turned northward.

"What are you plannin' t' do when

we get to California?" Howell asked.

"I got a ranch."

"H'm, that's awright. Y'know, at first I had 'n idea I'd head northward an' try my hand at pannin' gold. Now I ain't so sure. I got a wife an' a couple o' kids an' that'd be tough livin' f'r them. I gotta figger out some other way o' makin' a living."

"Think you might like workin' on a ranch?"

"O-h, sure. An' th' kids'd love it. That youngest one o' mine, Tommy, he's crazy 'bout horses."

"I c'n use a couple o' good men. Will Cather's gonna be my foreman. Th' Andersons are comin' with me, too. Think th' Howells'd like to join us?"

Tom Howell jerked his horse to a sudden stop. Raines pulled up and looked at him quickly.

"You on th' level?" Howell asked.

"Th' job's yours if you want it. Got a couple o' small cottages behind th' big house an' one o' th'm c'n be yours. You think it over an' let me know."

"I've thought it over."

Raines laughed.

"Awready?"

"Yep. Th' Howells are ready th' minute you say th' word."

"Swell. You're on th' payroll th' minute we hit California."

"Hey, will it be awright f'r me t' tell th' Missus?"

"'Course."

"She's been worryin' about what's gonna be with us when we get to California, an' when I tell 'er we're gonna work f'r you an' that Cather an' th' Andersons are gonna be part o' your outfit, she's gonna be doggone happy. Thanks, Raines, for givin' me a break."

"Forget it. Now suppose we get goin' again?"

THEY WERE within a mile or two of the train when they heard a whoop. There was a rush of hoofs and ten men came galloping up to them.

"Hey!" Howell yelled. "You all awright?"

"An' how!" a man answered. 'How'd we do, Raines?"

"Swell," Raines answered. "I wouldn't want a better bunch t' fight with."

"We sure played hell with McBride, didn't we?"

"Think you'll be up to makin' another surprise visit t'morrow night?" Raines asked.

"You c'n count me in on that party," Howell said.

"Me, too," another man said. "I wouldn't wanna miss it."

There was a general nodding of heads.

"Good," Raines said. "Now let's be on our way again. Cather'll be fit t' be tied if we don't show up around soon. Come on."

Will Cather was beside himself when they rode up to the train. He came bustling up to Raines and shook a pudgy finger in the youth's face.

"Damnit!" he sputtered. "Where'n hell've you been, huh? I thought this was gonna be one o' those one, two, three, bang affairs, an' then you'd be back again. Doggone your ornery hide, start talkin' an' talk fast!"

Howell nudged Raines.

"Awright if I get outta here?" he asked. "I'm in a helluva sweat t' tell Amy."

"Sure," Raines said. "G 'head."

Howell rode down the line of wagons.

"Hey," Cather said. "He's a married man, ain't he? An' ain't he got a wife an' s'me kids? How come he was with you?"

"Look, you fellers," Raines said, turning to the other men. "You've done a swell job tonight. You've earned a good sleep. Why don't you go along an' turn in?"

The men needed no urging. They wheeled their horses and rode away.

"Now," Raines said to Cather. "If you c'n shut up f'r exactly ten minutes I'll tell you all about it."

Tom Howell unsaddled his horse, tied him up to the rear wheel, climbed up into his wagon, took off his boots, slung his hat aside, unbuckled his gun belt and hung it up on a nail, took off his shirt and pants and dropped them on the floor, then he inched his way to where his wife lay asleep with her blanket drawn up close around her and her

face to the wall. He eased himself down beside her. She turned around instantly.

"Tom!"

"Sh-h-h! You wanna wake th' kids?"

"Are you all right?"

"'Course I am."

"WHERE WERE you?" she asked in a whisper. She moved closer to him. "Why didn't you tell me you were going off somewhere?"

"'Cause I didn't want to worry you," he answered in a hushed tone. "Raines an' a bunch uv us went to pay that McBride a visit. We shoulda done it right off, then we'da never heard o' him again. But we sure raised hell with him t'night, b'lieve me." He turned on his side, facing her. "Y'know, Amy, it don't pay t' say you don't like 'nybody 'till you've really had a chance t' find out what they're like. Take this feller Raines. You know how sore I was at him. We-ll, t'night I had a danged good chance t' see what he's made uv, an' he's awright. Fact is, he's a swell feller."

"I'm glad, Tom."

"Y'know, he's got a ranch t' go to soon's we hit California. His father left it to 'im. Cather's goin' with him as forem'n an' the Andersons are goin' along, too."

Amy Howell offered no comment.

"Bet th' kids'd love it if we had a chance t' live on a ranch, wouldn't they?"

"Better than anything else in the world."

"Wouldn't it be swell if we got that chance, an' then save our money an' maybe after a while buy us a little place that'd be all our own?"

She propped herself up on her elbows, peered at him in the darkness.

"Tom Howell," she said finally. "You haven't been drinking. I can tell that. But you're up to something. What is it? I want to know this very instant."

He laughed softly, reached out, took her in his arms and brought her closer.

"We're goin' with Raines, too," he said.

"O-h, Tom!"

"That's right," he continued. "Raines offered me a job same's Cather an' th' Andersons an' told me t' think it over. I told him I didn't hafta think it over f'r one single minute. I accepted pronto. He laughed an' said I was on th' payroll th' minute we hit California."

She clung to him, her head on his chest.

"O-h, yeah," he said again. "Nearly f'got t' tell you th' rest. Seems like there are s'me cottages on th' place an' Raines said one o' th'm would be f'r us. How d'you like that?"

"Oh, I'm so happy, I could cry!"

His arms tightened around her; a tear rolled down her cheek, and she turned her head away quickly. Her cheek brushed his and he felt the teary dampness of it.

"Hey," he whispered. "Amy, honey; for Pete's sake!"

She bowed her head, rested it against his shoulder. She sobbed for a moment, softly, sniffled once or twice, then beside him, pillowed her head in the hollow of his arm.

"Awright now?" he whispered.

"Yes."

He smiled to himself. Women were curious creatures. They cried when they were happy, and cried when they were unhappy. She sighed once, burrowed a bit deeper into the bed roll. He lay very still. He was thinking of California. He could almost see young Tommy astride a big horse.

"Amy," he said.

There was no response. She had dozed off. He closed his eyes. Presently he too fell asleep.

MINUTES AFTER Raines had left him and climbed into the wagon to rejoin his wife, Will Cather came sauntering down the line of shadow-draped wagons. He glanced at each wagon as he passed. When he came abreast of the first of the Heydrich wagons he stopped and looked up at it and grinned. He was reliving the wedding cermony he had performed.

"Wonder if that Sally Higgins ever got married?" he mused. "I sure come close t' gettin' hitched that time awright, 'bout as close as a man c'n

come to it without windin' up married. She was nice, awright, but th' minute 'er mother opened 'er mouth, I was lookin' f'r th' nearest door. An' 'er father, he listened to 'er for a minute, shook his head an' went out. I went after 'im, on'y he walked out while I just about flew outta th' place. I kinda remember runnin' into th' old gent and havin' a drink with him an' he shook hands with me an' patted me on th' back. That's th' last time I ever had 'ny thoughts 'bout gettin' married. 'Course I'm human so every once in a while I get to wonderin' whether I shoulda gone through with it with Sally. Then I get to thinkin' uv 'er mother an' then I know I did th' right thing."

A man climbed down from a nearby wagon and Cather eyed him curiously.

"S'matter?" he asked when he came up to him. "No sleep in you t'night?"

The man looked at him, hitched up his belt.

"O-h, I coulda done a good job o' sleepin'," he replied. "It was my wife who couldn't."

"Oh," Cather said.

"F'r two whole solid hours she's been jawin' away 'bout all th' fellers who wanted t' marry 'er," the man explained in disgust. "I hadda shut 'er up somehow so I got into my clothes and' got outta there. Bet she's still yappin' away. Once she gets started there ain't a damned thing c'n shut 'er up. Y'know, Cather, I've been married almost thirty years."

"Y'don't say! Thirty years, eh? That's a long long time."

"Yep, thirty years come September," the man continued. "But y' know somethin', Cather? After all them years I still don't know if I did th' smart thing gettin' myself hitched or if I'da been better off stayin' single. O-h, I'm willing t' give th' devil 'is due and own up that a wife's doggoned handy t' have around."

"But?"

"We-ll, it seems there was one feller in particular who wanted t' marry Dora, a drummer by th' name o' Honeywell, Francis Oliver Honeywell. He threatened t' jump off a cliff if she turned him down. He was so doggoned pretty, all th' girls fell f'r him. He never smelled o' horses an' such. Heck, no. He used some kind o' stinkum an' when th' girls got a whiff o' him, they just fell at 'is feet."

"Did he jump offa that cliff like he said he was gonna do?"

"Hell, no! He come past our place about three years afterwards an' fr'm what I could see o' him, he sure looked beautiful. An' did he stink! That stable o' mine smelled a heap better t' me. He didn't reco'nize Dora, didn't even give 'er a second look. F'r about a month after Dora mooned around like a sick calf, then she started yappin' about Mister Honeywell all over again an' it's been goin' on ever since f'r twenty-seven years. Y'know, Cather, if anybody had th' right t' jump off a cliff, I'm th' one."

THEY TURNED mechanically and strolled along.

"Got a brother o' mine who married a squaw," the man began again. "He allus was a smart one an' I'm allus willing t' give him credit f'r bein' smart. That squaw o' his tends t' everything, an' never opens 'er mouth 'cept maybe once or twice a day. Even then she don't say a heck uva lot 'cause she on'y knows a handful o' words an' most o' them are cuss words. But th' point I'm tryin' to make is that she c'n do everything any other woman c'n do an' do it without a peep. A woman like that's worth 'er weight in gold. Doggone it, Cather, when that son o' mine starts moonin' over girls, I'm gonna give him a talkin' to, an 'f he don't take it on th' run f'r th' nearest Injun camp, I'm gonna beat 'is brains out! Come on, man. I'll keep you company f'r th' rest o' th' night."

9

Westward, Ho!

THE DAWN sky was drab and colorless when the train stirred itself into wakefulness. Here and there canvas curtains were whipped back, and yawning and still sleepy-eyed people appeared, glanced skyward mechanically and climbed

down to the ground. The guards stamped out their camp fires and now, their rifles slung over their shoulders, they came tramping up to the train and headed for their wagons.

Bill Raines was buckling on his gun belt when Peggy opened her eyes.

"Mornin', sleepy head," he said.

She stretched herself, looked up at him and smiled.

"Is it morning already?" she asked.

"Sure is," he answered.

She made a wry face, added a pout.

"And I was having the very nicest dream I ever had and now I don't know how it ended."

He grinned at her.

"We-ll, supose you turn over an' go back t' sleep while I'm fixin' coffee? Maybe you c'n pick up where you left off an' see th' thing out."

"O-h, Bill, I couldn't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Our first breakfast, Bill? I couldn't let you fix it. Why, what would people say?"

"Th' heck with th'm."

She considered for a moment.

"Of course, Bill," she said finally, a bit hesitantly, "if you insisted. . . ."

He came to her side, knelt down, looked at her for a moment, bent over and kissed the tip of her nose.

"G'wan," he said. "Turn over an' get back t' that dream. When th' coffee's ready I'll call you."

She looked up at him. . . .a smile came over her face.

"You're awf'lly sweet, Bill."

"Y'think so, hey?"

"Yes. And I'm awf'lly glad I married you."

"You keep tellin' me that and I won't be fit t' live with," he said. "I'll get that swell-headed."

She reached up, drew him down to her and kissed him.

"There," she said. "You can get just as swell-headed as you please and I'll still love you. Bill, you're sure you don't mind fixing the coffee?"

"Nope."

SHE KISSED him a second time, held his face in her hands for a moment, sighed, smiled again, and finally released him, then she sank down, drew up the covers, turned over on her side and closed her eyes. He got to his feet and went out and climbed down from the wagon. He hitched up his belt when there was a sudden rush of hoofs. There was a woman's scream, a man's yell, and a deafening roar of gunfire. A bullet whined and ploughed through the wagon shaft, and a second one skimmed over the ground squarely between his feet. His Colt leaped into his hand and it snapped upward, steadied, then it thundered twice as a couple of horsemen bent low in their saddles came pounding past the wagon.

The blast of gunfire lifted one man out of his saddle and sent him slumping earthward; a horse directly behind him screamed with pain, stumbled to his knees and fell pinning his rider beneath him. The man managed somehow to free himself, rolled away and fought his way to his feet when the Colt belched flame and lead.. The man tottered. . .another bullet hurled him to the ground and he fell in a heap with his gun hand doubled up under him.

Raines leaped up on the wagon, dove over the driver's seat and hunched down behind it.

"Peggy!" he yelled without turning. "Stay down on th' floor!"

Hastily he reloaded his gun, remembered that he had left his rifle just inside the wagon and he reached for it quickly, grabbed it and laid it down at his feet, levelled the Colt expectantly. He heard the pounding of hoofs again and he knew the raiders were swinging back along the line of wagons. He raised his head cautiously and peered out. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a strung-out line of horsemen racing up the line, saw flame belch from their guns. Rifle fire thundered in reply and he jerked his head down and waited.

There was only a momentary wait. Hoofs pounded past and he peered out and emptied the Colt into a group of men. Hastily he holstered the Colt and caught up the rifle, levelled it and when a lathered horse came into his sights, he fired. The

horse reared up and crashed over. His rider, riding with his feet free of the stirrups, rolled over, scrambled to his feet, whirled and snapped a shot at Bill. The rifle roared and the man's face disappeared in a haze of gun smoke. When it lifted a bit and Bill looked down the man lay sprawled out on the ground.

Rifle in hand, Raines jumped down, huddled behind a wheel. He stole a quick look around him. Everywhere he looked men with rifles or Colts in their hands were kneeling behind wagon wheels and firing through the spokes at their attackers. Again Raines reloaded his Colt, held it ready; but this time there was no returning clatter of hoofs. There was a yell from somewhere far along the line.

"We got 'em!" he heard a man yell triumphantly. "We beat 'em off, th' murderin' dogs!"

He laughed and got up and holstered his gun. Will Cather came running up the line, a gun gripped in his pudgy right hand.

"You awright, boy?" he demanded pantingly. "You didn't get hit, did you?"

"Hit, hell," Raines answered. "How'd we do?"

"O-h, we whittled th'm down awright. 'Less my eyes are seein' double, I'd say there's more'n a dozen o' th'm layin' out there in th' grass that ain't never gonna be uv any use t' McBride again."

"We oughta go after th'm," Raines said. "They won't be expectin' it an' we might catch th'm an' maybe finish th'm off. You hold th' fort, Will, while I get th' boys an' go after th'm."

HE BOLTED away so quickly that Cather had no chance to say anything in answer. It seemed but minutes later when horsemen came riding out from in between wagons, spurred their mounts and and rode down the line. Raines came sprinting back, saddled his horse, shoved his rifle into the saddle boot and leaped up astride the animal. He wheeled and raced away.

"Watch y'self!" Cather yelled after him but Raines did not answer.

There were twenty-seven horsemen in the hastily recruited force that awaited Raines. He ran his eye over them and nodded. Tom Howell was among them. He grinned at Raines.

"Awright," Raines said quickly. "Here's what we do. We're splittin' up. Half o' you go with Howell, the other half with me. Tom, you an' your bunch ride westward f'r maybe a mile, then swing in a circle southward. We'll ride eastward then circle t' meet you. Your horses oughta be set f'r a good fast run so let th'm out. I got 'n idea McBride's outfit is pretty well shot up an' if that's so they won't be hustlin'. I think maybe we c'n catch th'm b'tween us."

Howell's eyes glinted.

"If we do, we're gonna dismount an' move in on foot, with each man takin' no chances but still holdin' nothing back. If you fellers run into th'm try t' drive th'm toward us. Get the idea?"

"Sure," Howell said readily.

"Awright," Raines said again. "Thirteen o' you men foller Howell. You other fellers foller me."

There was a bit of confusion with horsemen wheeling this way, then that way, but presently the two groups were formed. Howell twisted around in his saddle, waiting.

"Use your rifles," Raines called. "No close quarters, an' no Colts. Go 'head."

"Let's go!" Howell yelled.

He dashed away followed by the men who had gathered around him. Raines' party spurred away to the east.

"Double up!" he yelled over his shoulder.

The strung-out line behind him became a compact group riding two abreast. With Raines setting the pace, flashing hoofs dashed over the ground at a breakneck rate of speed, then suddenly Raines was turning and yelling over his shoulder:

"Watch it! We're swingin' now!"

THERE WAS no discernible break in the party's pace.. swiftly they swung in an arc that carried them southward, then the distant crack of a rifle reached them. Every man's head jerked up. Howell's band

had made contact with McBride's fleeing horsemen. Now swelling rifle fire echoed on the early morning air. Rifles were loosened in saddle boots. Their swift pace swept them over the range and brought them closer to their quarries. They topped a rise, reined in briefly when Raines checked his horse, stood up in their stirrups and looked southward. A quarter of a mile away dust clouds were rising and billowing skyward.

"They're drivin' th'm toward us," Raines said. "Let's go but all o' you be ready t' dismount th' minute I give th' word. When I holler, get down, turn your horses loose an' hit th' ground on your bellies. Don't crowd. Th' more room b'tween you means th' less chance McBride's men'll have o' hittin' anybody. Let's go."

They rode on again, stirrup to stirrup, with one booted foot free of its stirrup, ready to dismount the very moment Raines gave the word. It came soon, suddenly, far sooner than anyone expected. It came suddenly because when the dust clouds began to lift they saw a band of horsemen appear.

"There they are," someone said but no one else said anything.

"Dismount!" Raines said calmly and unhurriedly.

Fourteen legs swung over fourteen saddles and in a moment fourteen rifles were jerked free and gripped tight. The horses were turned loose. They simply drifted back, halted and began to munch grass.

"Spread out," Raines called.

A couple of hundred yards south of McBride's outfit another band of horsemen appeared. It was Tom Howell's party. McBride's troop had halted.

"There's about thirty o' th'm," someone said.

"Yeah," another man said. "But we've got th'm where we want th'm. B'tween us."

Rifle fire broke out from Howell's men who had halted and dismounted .. rifle smoke swirled around them, hiding them for a moment or two. Now McBride's men began to answer.

"Awright!" Raines yelled. "Down on your bellies an' start movin' in on th'm! Fire!"

Half a dozen rifles opened up, then the volume increased as Raines' men, moving forward at a crawling pace, settled down to the business at hand. In another minute the crashing thunder was deafening. Smoke swirled around, reaching from the very ground to tree-top height, and forming a screen around the McBride outfit.

"Move in closer!" Raines yelled and his sprawled-out men began to inch their way forward again. "Pour it into th'm!"

The rifle fire reached a new high and the ground vibrated from the leaden thunder. There was a brief respite when empty guns were hastily reloaded, but the interlude was short, and the ear-splitting din began to swell again. The smoke lifted and when their targets were revealed in full, the firing was quicker and even heavier. Howell's men were closing in now and Raines kneeling as he fired took note of it.

"Spread out more!" he yelled. "Don't wanna give th'm a chance t' break out!"

THREE OF McBride's riders sought to make a break for freedom at that very moment. They came whirling away from their companions, flung themselves forward against their horses' necks and spurred their way into the open. Rifle fire sent two of the fleeing horses plunging to the ground and their riders, gaining their feet, wheeled and raced back; the third man survived as did his horse, bolted eastward and just when success appeared to be ready to crown his efforts, his horse stumbled and fell and hurled the man over his head. The man twisted away in the grass and staggered to his feet. A rifle cracked and the man stiffened and suddenly pitched forward on his face. A man yelled triumphantly somewhere in the tightening circle and then the steady, merciless pounding of rifle fire was renewed.

The grazing horses raised their heads and watched the battle briefly; then they forgot about it and its

echoing thunder and went back to munching grass.

The fire from Howell's men seemed to slacken off now.. when it broke out again the crashing of their rifles indicated that they were even closer to McBride's trapped men. There was no need for Raines to urge his men to move forward; they crawled forward willingly and eagerly, poured volley after volley into the cornered men, reloaded, and promptly resumed their firing. Then it was over; over so suddenly and abruptly that few of the men seemed to realize that they were drawing no answering fire from McBride's band. Those who did realize it, sensing victory within their grasp, increased their fire, shooting at shadowy figures that were barely visible in the haze of smoke. They had no way of knowing that the men who were still astride their horses were dead, that they had died in their saddles and that the continued blasting they were receiving was simply tearing them to bits. Raines was among the first to sense the situation. He came leaping to his feet.

"Hold it!" he hollered.

The fire along the circle slackened and finally died out, although for many minutes afterward the echo of gun thunder lingered in the air. The smoke that was swirling around the raiders began to lift; it billowed upward in feathery clouds but after a short climb skyward it dissolved into nothingness. The attackers got to their feet, their rifles lowered but still ready for instant use. Their eyes ranged over the scene before them. Dead men and dead horses lay sprawled out in the lush grass, grotesquely twisted and broken. Widening eyes stared hard, held by the horrible fascination of the havoc they had wrought. They saw a raider's body slip sideways out of his saddle and topple to the ground; their eyes shifted, halted on a second man when he swayed and tumbled earthward. A third man and finally a fourth man fell limply and their eyes followed each one to the ground.

Raines had put down his rifle. Now he came striding forward. He circled a fallen horse, stopped briefly and looked down into the faces of the dead men as he came up to them. There was a sudden stirring, a movement, just beyond him and he looked up. There were two horses standing about ten feet away; there were two men astride them, and both men were bent forward in their saddles; there seemed to be nothing unusual about them save that they looked 'dead'. He turned away. In that instant the 'dead' men came to life. Raines heard their horses whirl and leap; instinctively he threw himself sideways.

A Colt roared at the same moment and a bullet ploughed the earth at his feet. The two horsemen spun past him as he struck the earth. He landed on his shoulder and slithered over on his stomach. He jerked out his gun and scrambled to his feet. There were yells and shouts and a couple of hastily fired but badly aimed shots and some of the men ran for their horses. But it was too late.. the two 'dead' men were out of range and racing away in a westerly direction. Raines cursed aloud.

A horseman came dashing up, pulled up directly in front of Raines. The rider was Tom Howell.

"C'mon!" he yelled. "We c'n get th'm!"

Another man, one of Raines' group, rode up.

"Get down," Raines said quickly.

The man looked at him.

"Get down!" Raines cried.

The man swung himself out of the saddle. Raines jerked the reins out of his hand, crowded him out of the way and vaulted up astride the horse. He wheeled the animal.

"Come on, Tom!" he flung over his shoulder.

HOWELL WAS at his side as they dashed away. They heard hoofbeats behind them but they disregarded them. They wanted no assistance in handling the fugitives. Spurring their horses, they sent them bounding over the range. They urged them on faster, drove them on by lashing them with the loose ends of their reins. Just as the fight had ended so suddenly, it was with equal suddenness that they overtook the fleeing horseman. Actually it was

Howell who spotted them. Riding with his left hand gripping the reins and his rifle clutched tightly in his right hand, he yelled suddenly, and snapped the weapon up and fired.

"Got 'im!" he yelled excitedly.

He swerved southward sharply and Raines, following his move, wheeled with him. A hundred feet away a horse lay threshing about in the grass. Just beyond him was a waiting horseman who was beckoning a lumbering man, urging him to run faster. Raines needed no close-up view of them to know that the horseman was the gunman, Lopat, and that the big man who ran like a bear was McBride.

McBride reached Lopat's side. The gunman grabbed McBride's upthrust right hand and pulled hard, as if he thought he could haul the big man up behind him. Raines' Colt interfered.. in fact, a bullet from the big six-shooter struck Lopat's horse in a vital spot and the animal cried out and sank to his knees. The swarthy killer kicked his feet free of the stirrups and leaped nimbly to the ground. He whirled and snapped a shot at the oncoming man. The bullet tore Howell's hat off his head, sent it lofting away. It finally dropped limply in the grass. McBride, turning, took a quick look, decided that to stand and fight meant death, and began to run. Lopat stood his ground.. he fired twice more and Howell's horse cried out each time and finally stopped. His injured legs gave way beneath him and he fell down. Howell cursed and got off him. Lopat laughed and started away after McBride when Howell's rifle roared with an authoritative voice.

Lopat staggered momentarily, steadied himself and turned around. His gun slanted upward. There were two shots as Raines swerved away in pursuit of McBride. He stole a quick look over his shoulder. He saw Lopat spin and plunge face downward into the grass.. shifting his eyes he saw Howell sag and crumple up on the ground. He pulled up abruptly and wheeled when four horsemen came pounding up.

"Take care o' Howell," he yelled. "I'm goin' after McBride."

The men dismounted, ran to Howell's side and bent over him. Reluctantly Raines spurred his mount and darted away again. A bullet whined past his head and he bent low; a second bullet spun dirt in his horse's face. Raines decided he had had enough. He pulled up and slid out of the saddle, whacked his horse on the rump and the animal, snorting protestingly, wheeled and trotted back. A bullet ploughed the earth a foot to the left of him and Raines promptly twisted away. A fourth and a fifth shot echoed but missed him too. He skidded to a stop.

"Awright, McBride," he panted. "This is it, y'know. This is pay-off time. You c'n use that last bullet on y'self. If you don't, when I get to you, I'm gonna blast you apart. What'll it be?"

McBride did not delay in making up his mind; his last bullet drilled through Raines' hat and the youth yelled and plunged forward. There was a scampering and a big man suddenly appeared in front of him. It was McBride and he whirled and hurled his emptied gun at his pursuer. It sailed over Raines' head and fell to the ground. McBride bolted away. He had put some thirty feet between Raines and himself when the youth's Colt roared. McBride stumbled and fell. Raines waited patiently and after a minute McBride forced himself up. His left arm hung limply against his side.

THE COLT thundered a second time and McBride grunted and staggered. Now his right arm hung uselessly at his side. There was a stain of blood on his left shirtsleeve; now blood dampened and darkened his right sleeve. McBride steadied himself, braced himself on widespread legs. He raised his head, moistened his lips with his tongue, a quick, darting, nervous action. The muzzle of Raines' Colt yawned and gaped at McBride's ample stomach and chest.

"In case you don't know it," Raines said. "We got Lopat."

McBride's eyes gleamed. He raised his head just a bit more. The Colt thundered in his face, and gun smoke

swirled around him. He was motionless for a moment, then he pitched forward and crashed on his face. Raines holstered his gun, turned on his heel and trudged away. The horse he had borrowed was munching grass some forty feet away. He turned his head and looked at Raines when the youth came striding up to him. He permitted Raines to mount, wheeled and loped off, quickened his pace without voicing a protest when Raines spurred him. They pulled up when they reached the spot where Howell had fallen. The men kneeling around him looked up.

"How is he?" Raines asked quickly. "Hit bad?"

One of the men laughed.

"He's got a head on him that must be made o' iron," he answered. "That bullet woulda killed most anybody else. It just creased his skull. He'll be awright pronto."

THE DAYS and the weeks that followed were uneventful, but they were happy ones. A couple of guards were posted at night but actually there was no need for such precautions; nothing happened, no one appeared to disturb the calm, and after a while the guards themselves relaxed to such an extent that they simply rolled themselves up in their blankets at their appointed posts and went to sleep.

The train lumbered steadily westward and northern Nevada was a delight; the intense, toll-taking heat of southern Wyoming and the oppressive air of Utah were memories now as they struck across Nevada with Virginia City directly ahead of them. Eyes never turned from the west; everyone's thoughts were of the promised land that was now but a scant couple of hundred miles away.

They were probably three days' travel from Virginia City when someone called Will Cather's attention to a dust cloud some distance behind them that was coming toward them at a rapid pace. Rifles were hastily snatched up, the women and children were hustled into the depths of the wagons and ordered to lay flat on the wagons' floor, then a line of outriders was quickly formed and sent out with Raines riding at its head. Faces that had learned to relax in those few happy weeks grew grim and tight-lipped again. Then a rhythmic pounding of hoofs swelled and caused a general catching of everyone's breath.

A long line of blue-clad horsemen riding four abreast swept along the train and a slim, sun-bronzed officer with a cavalry sabre swinging against his left leg came whirling up to the head of the train, rode around the Anderson wagon, spotted Cather riding in advance of it, pulled up alongside of him and snapped a salute. A flag-bearer clattered up and everyone's heart pounded as never before when the stars and stripes began to whip about in the breeze. There was a yell of delight somewhere in the train.

"Pull up!" Cather yelled, twisting around.

The train ground and braked to a stop. A handful of young officers, and a couple of grizzled men whom Cather promptly decided were scouts, rode up and reined in.

"Howdy," Cather said heartily.

The first officer acknowledged it with a smile.

"Troop C and D, Fifth United States Cavalry," he said. "I am Major Steele, commanding."

"I'm Will Cather."

THEY SHOOK hands gravely.

"What are you fellers doin' out here?" Cather asked.

"We're on route to California," the Major answered. "We're to establish a garrison at Fresno.

"I take it you're headed that way, too," Steele continued. "With your permission we'd like to go along with you people. Of course," and he laughed, "we've a purpose in doing that. Our rations are running a bit low and perhaps you might be willing to sell us some of your supplies."

"We've got enough bacon t' supply 'n army," Cather replied, "an' you fellers are welcome to as much uv it as you c'n eat it."

"Splendid," Major Steele said.

"On'y we haven't got any t' sell. My folks wouldn't hear o' sellin' any-

thing. Look, longs we've stopped, how 'bout you fellers joinin' us in a bite, huh?"

"Thank you," Steele said. "Thank you very much."

"Forget it," Cather said. He turned in his saddle. "Missus Heydrich," he called.

Anna came forward; Katey followed, stopped a bit behind her. Anna smiled as she came up.

"Major Steele," Cather said. "I'd like you t' know Missus Heydrich. Th' pretty girl b'hind 'er is 'er daughter Katey."

Steele's right hand snapped to the brim of his dust-streaked campaign hat.

"Missus Heydrich," Cather went on. "How'd you like t' have th' Major an maybe one o' his officers eat with you people?"

Anna smiled delightedly.

"We would like it very, very much," she answered. She turned quickly. "Katey, you will take care of these gentlemen, please, while I go see about things. Yes?"

Major Steele dismounted. He beckoned to one of his officers, a tall, good-looking youth who swung himself out of the saddle, stepped forward quickly, halted and saluted.

"Miss Heydrich," Steele said and Katey's cheeks showed a tinge of crimson. "May I present Lieutenant Webster?"

"How do you do," Katey said.

"Your servant, Madam," Webster said, saluting again.

"Webster," the Major said, "suppose you go along with Miss Heydrich? I want a few words with Mr. Cather then I'll follow you."

Train people backed to permit Katey and the tall young officer to pass through.

Hustling about with Anna urging him on Kurt Heydrich placed four short lengths of board on the grass near their second wagon; Anna quickly spread a table cloth over the boards.

"It is one of your very best," Kurt said, looking at it. "No?"

ANNA SMILED.

"I have never used it before," she said. "Kurt, Fresno, California; have you ever heard of it?"

"Fresno?" he repeated. "There is

"You know someone who lives there?"

Anna smiled again, deeply.

"Anna," Kurt said. "When you smile like that, I know you are up to something. What is it?"

"Nothing, Kurt, nothing," she said quickly. "It's. . we-ll, I was wondering how it would be there, you know, for us to live there."

"I see. Who is the young man who lives there?"

Anna laughed.

"His name may be Steele," she said. "Or it may be something else. His exact name I do not know, that is, yet. But if I tell you something, you will not be angry with me, will you?"

"First you must tell me."

"There is to be a fort in Fresno," she said. "These officers are to command it. Perhaps..."

"I see. So mama is again making plans for her daughter."

Anna did not answer.

"I suppose it will always be like that," Kurt mused. "As long as there are mothers and marriageable daughters."

"Kurt," she said and he came to her side. "Look. There is Katrina now. You see her, with that tall young officer? See how she looks up at him, how she listens to everything he says, and now how she laughs? Kurt, have you ever seen her happier?"

He shook his head.

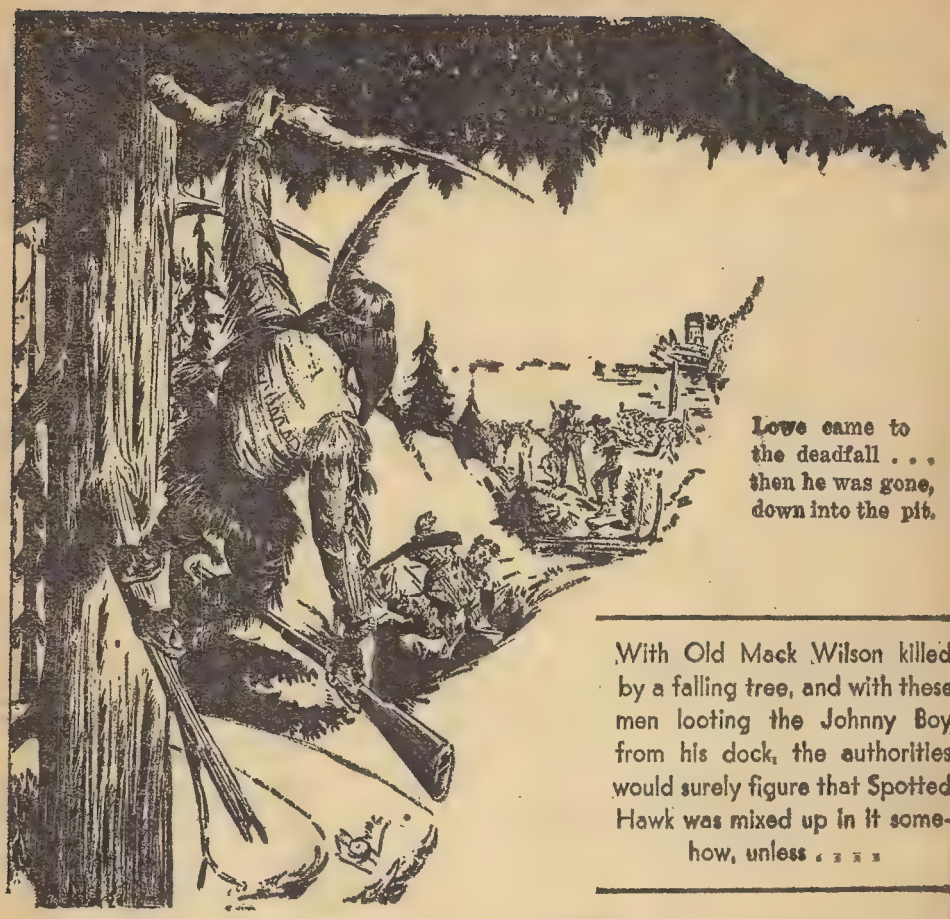
"We-ll, Kurt, shall we go to Fresno?" she asked with a smile.

He hitched up his belt.

"The silverware and the dishes," he said. "I will get them."

He climbed up into the wagon. disappeared inside for a moment; he reappeared presently, handed them down to her. He watched her as she went about setting the 'table'. He saw her lips move, then he heard something he had not heard in a long time. Anna was singing. Kurt Heydrich's smile was understandable. He was happy.

THE END



Love came to the deadfall . . . then he was gone, down into the pit.

With Old Mack Wilson killed by a falling tree, and with these men looting the Johnny Boy from his dock, the authorities would surely figure that Spotted Hawk was mixed up in it somehow, unless . . . .

Death Rides The River

AS THE side-wheeler came closer to the dock, Spotted Hawk saw the name *Rocky Belle* on its stern, the faded red lettering barely readable even though the background paint of the old river-packet was a dull gray. He had known, since first catching sight of the boat, that it was not the new Jorgenson packet, the *Johnny Boy,* for he had a riverman's eye and he could recognize every boat on his run, even though it were far in the distance, engines working on the broad swell of the Misouri river. And the Sioux was disappointed. He had wanted bad to see the new *Johnny Boy.*

For two years talk had been running up and down the river, talk that extolled the virtues of the *Johnny Boy.* Built in the New Orlean docks for the Missouri river trade, the *Johnny Boy,* according to reports, was the toughest, fastest hull afloat between St. Louis and Fort Benton. An army major had said a hundred black Missouri mules kicked in each

by

Lee Floren

piston. That meant there were two hundred horsepower behind the churns.

"Where is the *Johnny Boy*?" asked his squaw, Broken Foot.

He said "Something must have happened."

Two days before, when the packet *Muddy Queen* had docked to refuel with cottonwood, the captain of that boat had told them the *Johnny Boy*, in all its splendor, would be the next packet up the Missouri, on a trial run to Fort Benton, yet here was the old *Rocky Belle*, now puffing into dock.

"There are soldiers on it," Broken Foot said.

Soldiers lined the deck, gray uniforms in the late afternoon sun. And usually soldiers, when a boat docked for cord-wood, were boisterous and loud, calling and joking as the packet slid into dock. But these men, for some reason, were, for the most part, silent. Of course, a few had cat-calls and jokes, but not many of them engaged in good-natured horseplay.

And their silence did not fit them for they were all men in their early twenties; some were in their 'teens. And Spotted Hawk knew, without being told, that they were bound for battle. For many months, like a black rain-cloud, threat of the Blackfoot war hung across the Territory of Montana.

Broken Foot said, "They go to fight with Running Cloud and his Blackfeet, I think." Then her inborn optimism showed through with, "But maybe the war has not started, and they are just getting ready."

The Rocky Belle captain hollered, "Comin' in, Spotted Hawk," and the mate threw down the line. Spotted Hawk took dallies around the big cottonwood post submerged deep in the mud and tied the packet fast. Broken Foot had hobbled down the dock to the stern, where a sergeant heaved the hawser line to her. There were calls from the soldiers on the deck and Spotted Hawk heard one say, "Look, there's a woman."

"A squaw, fellow," another soldier corrected.

Spotted Hawk ran to where his wife held the rope. He said, "Pay them no attention," and he spoke in Sioux. She answered, her wide face smiling, "It makes no difference what they say, my man."

They had the packet tied fast and the captain and mate came down, hitting the cottonwood dock. "Where's Old Mack?" the captain said gruffly.

"He's dead."

The captain had been bending over to see the hawser knot; now he straightened quickly. He was an old river man with a leathery face. He repeated, "Dead?" as though he doubted his hearing. "What happened?"

Spotted Hawk told him how the day before, Mack Wilson, boss of the wood-cutting crew, had gone back into the timber, looking for trees to cut into cord-wood. He had not come in at sundown and they had found him dead, the pine tree smashing his head into the earth.

The captain rubbed his jaw. "That don't seem like Ol' Mack," he finally said. "He knows how to fall timber; he's had years of experience. You think he fell this tree and it fell wrong, killing him?"

Spotted Hawk nodded. He had liked the old woodchopper, and this wasn't easy for him, either. Broken Foot stood silent, her weight, as usual, on her right leg, her strong leg.

The captain asked where Old Mack's body was and Spotted Hawk told him the old man was in the cabin on the bed. The captain seemed, for a moment, undecided, and Spotted Hawk, reading the cause of his indecision, said, "I won't run away. I'll stay here. You have my word. Somebody has to take care of the boats as they come. Between us, we can cut the cordwood. We have quite a supply on hand now."

"What's going on down there?" a voice asked from the deck. "We have to refuel and get going, Captain. The Blackfeet won't wait for us."

The captain turned, his dark face darker. "You run your troops on land,

Major Smith, but by gum, I handle this boat! If we aren't churnin' fast enough for you and your grays get off my packet and go overland!"

The major was a thin, immaculate man. He had a faint smile below his well-cared mustache. "Take the dead man on board and we'll take him into Fort Benton for burial. Sergeant, go to the cabin and get him."

The packet's crew was coming down the gang-plank and going toward the cords of cottonwood piled in long rows on the bank. They formed a line and passed the chunks along it. The chunks moved along the line of men, came to the bend, then disappeared into the hold, where the boiler-room crew was stacking them to be used for fuel.

A husky sergeant and two privates, a stretcher between them, went to the cabin, and carried back Mack Wilson's body, an army blanket thrown over the corpse. The Blackfeet, according to the captain, had moved against Fort Shaw, on the Sun River to the west. He had left St. Louis behind the *Johnny Boy*, the new packet had developed steam trouble. No, the *Johnny Boy* hadn't been on a speed run; she had run free as far as Fort Union, where she had been forced, under Army orders, to pick up soldiers, heading for Fort Shaw. The steam trouble—evidently a leaking steam head—had docked her at Fort Peck, seventy miles to the east. The *Rocky Belle*, hauling equipment for the Landusky mines, had been forced to unload at Fort Peck, and take on the *Johnny Boy's* soldiers.

The captain was gruff and angry. He didn't like the damn' soldiers, he didn't like the damn' officers. He had started out of St. Louis with mining equipment, silent and steady in the hold, and he'd ended up with a bunch of noisy, loud-mouthed army officers. He cursed his luck in front of the major, who still held to his thin smile.

"The *Johnny Boy* should be the next one to dock," the captain said. "Give it two days, Spotted Hawk. She's loaded with arms from stern to aft, and she's got ca'tridges on her, too. Boxes and crates of them. These soldiers took all the arms and powder we could crawl with and left the rest in the *Johnny's Boy's* hold, figurin' it would dock in Ft. Benton about the time the *Rocky Belle* ties to." He added, "She carried a few passengers out of St. Louie too, an' they're aboard her."

"She's all loaded, sir," the mate said.

The captain nodded. The mate went aboard. Spotted Hawk saw that the major's smile, instead of showing amusement, now showed impatience. The Sioux had known the captain for over six years, for he and Broken Foot had worked with Mack Wilson at this wood-cutter's post for that length of time. He knew, knowing the captain, that the man didn't know quite how to put his feelings into words.

"We'll stay here with the cordwood," Spotted Hawk said.

The captain gave him a quick look. "Of course, I know you didn't kill Mack Wilson, Spotted Hawk, but the authorities down in Fort Benton will think it damn' funny an experienced lumber-man like Mack'd let a tree fall on him. The law down there will want an investigation. By rights, I should take you along, but there'd be nobody to cut more fuel for the *Johnny Boy*, and it will need plenty when it reaches here."

Broken Foot said, "We'll be here. If we had killed him we would have left, wouldn't we?"

"The authorities will take that into consideration, I reckon. This army man would probably take you in right now, was there somebody qualified to take your place here."

The major spoke. "I certainly would, sir. But we need every soldier to Ft. Shaw. Will you please get on board, Captian? We're held up on your account."

"To hell with you and your brass buttons," the captain snorted. He walked very slowly to the gangplank.

THEY STOOD on the dock, hand in hand, and watched the murky gray of the Missouri claim the lighter gray of the old *Rocky Belle*. Thus

they had stood, many times before, watching the packets move against the current toward the west, or swing grandly along, coasting on the big Missouri, running for the east. But always, as they had stood and watched, old Mack Wilson had watched them, pipe in his mouth, and his gray eyes squinted a little, as was his habit.

Finally the *Rocky Belle* was gone. To Spotted Hawk it seemed, suddenly, that they were all alone, that civilization was out there somewhere, thousands and thousands of miles away. Broken Foot was sobbing.

They were deep sobs, coming from some hidden source he did not know she had had, and they hurt him, moving behind his dark face and giving his eyes pain. He had never heard her sob this way before. He had heard her cry in happiness, but that cry was not like this, for her laughter had been underneath it.

"He should not have said that in front of you," he said.

"He meant well, husband. What else could he say? There will have to be an investigation, as he said, and after all we are only Indians."

"We're human, even if we are dark."

He put his arm around her and they walked off the dock. He kept his walk in unison with her hobble. When she had been twelve, back in the lodges around Bismark in North Dakota Territory, her pony had fallen with her, and since then she had walked slowly. They had been children together and together they had heard, what seemed foolish to them, even at that time, the talk of the warpath. He had been twenty and she had been eighteen when they had married. There had been no tribal ceremony; they had gone to the Father at Ft. Union. The Dakota Sioux were restless, losing their hunting-grounds against white trappers and the buffalo-men, and they had not gone back to the Bismark lodges; they had gone west into Blackfoot country and old Mack Wilson, out of the kindness of his gruff heart, had taken the "Injun" on as a woodcutter.

"Hush," he said sternly, "we still have an hour to work."

He set to work with his saw and, when he sawed off the blocks of yellow pine, she put them on a chopping block. She sat on a log and chopped the blocks in two, splitting them down the middle, the grain parting easily under her heavy hatchet. Usually he and Mack Wilson had sawed together, one at each end of the saw; now he sawed alone, the steel hard to handle even though he had taken the handle off the other end.

At deep dusk a packet slid down the river, running fast with the current. The boat did not stop for fuel, for it was using little steam, and would probably refuel at Fort Peck.

The deep throat of the steam whistle opened and they waved the white cloth, and the packet whistled back. Then it was gone, the river taking it. They were both tired. But still sleep was slow to come to Spotted Hawk.

Next day, when the afternoon was dying, the three men came into camp. Spotted Hawk was working the saw and it made a small, insistent noise. The noise was big enough to hide the sound of the men. Broken Foot saw them first and she gasped, "There are three strangers."

They were coming across the clearing then, and each led two mules, which they turned loose with dragging halter-ropes to graze in the clearing. One was very tall, well over six feet, and the other was tall too; the third was short. The tall man said, "How, Injuns?"

Spotted Hawk tried to hide his surprise. Men came by the river, not overland; he believed, in the six years he had cut wood at this post, only one man had come to the spot by land—he had been a trapper who had come down to catch a packet at the landing. Now three men and stepped out of the buckbrush.

He said, "How," and laid down his saw. Broken Foot looked at them over the block of wood she had been ready

to split, her hatchet idle on the chopping-block. The short man looked at her steadily.

"You want to catch the river-boat?" Spotted Hawk asked.

The very tall man, whose name turned out to be Weber, laughed a little. "Yeah, we'll catch the packet, We'll catch the *Johnny Boy*. It's due tomorow, I understand."

Spotted Hawk watched them closely. He didn't like the looks of them. He wondered why each man led two pack-mules. He wondered also how they knew about the *Johnny Boy*, and that tomorrow would bring the super packet into the dock.

"It's late," Spotted Hawk replied.

The short man, whose name turned out to be Johnson, said, "It's two days late; it should be here tomorrow."

Spotted Hawk asked, "How did you know that?"

Johnson glanced at Weber. Weber shrugged. Johnson said, "I left the *Rocky Belle* right before it came into dock here yesterday. I went over the side an' swum into land. I boarded it at Fort Peck."

Their plan was creeping on on Spotted Hawk, the Sioux. He remembered the captain saying the *Rocky Belle* and *Johnny Boy* had exchanged at Fort. Peck. The captain had said that the *Johnny Boy* still carried many rifles and much be used against the Blackfeet at Fort Shaw. This man had gone out of Fort Peck with the *Rocky Belle* to warn these others that the *Johnny Boy* not the Rocky Belle, carried the rifles and pounds of powder.

Luck had played into the hands of these men. For, had the guns and ammunition been on the *Rocky Belle*, they could never have hit the side-wheeler and gotten them; the army rode aboard that packet. But the blown-out steamhead had transferred the army men to the *Rocky Belle*, and now many rifles and much ammunition rode with the *Johnny Boy*, with a few soldiers on it—a mere handful, according to the captain and a few civilians.

Taking the *Johnny Boy* would be impossible for three men to do, unless they had inside help on the packet. These three, Spotted Hawk guessed, were no fools, and he also guessed that they had help riding on the *Johnny Boy*. The pack-mules, then, were to tote the loot away.

These thoughts went through him, and he looked at Broken Foot, wondering at her dark expressionless face. His rifle leaned against a stump about ten feet away. He moved quickly toward it. Johnson's boot flew out to trip him and, as he fell, the other man, Lowe, kicked him in the neck.

For a while, Spotted Hawk thought he was going unconscious, but, as he rolled over, he saw Broken Foot bring her hatchet back, and fling it at Weber. The tall man jumped, and the hatchet went by him to land in the dirt. Johnson had Spotted Hawk's rifle, and Lowe kicked again, but he missed.

"Lay there, Injun," Lowe ordered savagely.

Broken Foot held a block of wood. Spotted Hawk said thickly, "Do not throw it, woman. You can do nothing." He spoke in Sioux.

Weber looked at Johnson. "What did he say?"

"He told her not to toss that hunk of cordwood," Johnson replied.

Weber stood silent. Johnson unloaded Spotted Hawk's rifle. He put the cartridges in his pocket and put the rifle down against the stump. Lowe asked, "Should we kill them?"

Weber said, "Don't talk like a complete idiot, Lowe. These river-cap tains never come into a dock unless they see the woodcutters out to wave them in. They aren't taking any chances. T o o many wood-cuttin' camps have been looted by Injuns who had set a trap when the packet come in. Them captains make sure things are all right before they dock."

Johnson said, "He's right."

Lowe shook his head slowly. "They're dangerous to us," he said.

"That may be," Weber stated, "But we can't kill them, until the *Johnny Boy* docks. That's certain."

SPOTTED HAWK sat on the ground, rubbing his neck. Broken Foot was beside him, whimpering a little. Spotted Hawk was thinking that, with Old Mack Wilson dead, killed by a falling tree, and with these men looting the *Johnny Boy* from his dock, this would look bad for him. Perhaps the authorities would figure he had wanted to get Wilson out of the way so he could let these men loot the *Johnny Boy?* What else was there to think?

They had looked forward for months to the *Johnny Boy's* arrival, talking about the grand day when the proud packet would slide into their dock: now the whole thing was a broken dream, and it seemed unreal and impossible. But it was true. The ache in Spotted Hawk's neck told him that.

And now, when the packet came to dock, it would be boarded by river-pirates, who would loot it of army rifles and ammunition, these pirates probably aided by other thieves, working inside the boat. And up at Fort Shaw, where soldiers needed ammunition, there would be rifle-hammers falling on empty gun-barrels, and the Blackfeet were on the move.

And there was more to it than that. There was his pride—and Broken Foots' pride—in being part of the great network of packets, moving up and down this lazy river; there was this responsibility, handed down to him by dead Mack Wilson. For the old man, who had cut wood on this landing for over fifteen years, had always boasted that no packet had ever slid into his dock and found him without adequate wood cut—cordwood that would go into its boiler and turn water into power. They had accepted this responsibility and gradually, day by day, year by year, those packets had become a part of them, and they, in turn, had become a part of the river-crew. And Spotted Hawk, the Sioux woodcutter, mentally promised that tomorrow, when the grand *Johnny Boy* docked, he and Broken Foot would wave it in, and there would be cordwood for its boilers.

They had his rifle. Without that, a man could not run into the woods, even if he found the opportunity, which he probably would not find. For without a rifle a man would starve. He had a sudden plan: he would break away and go down the river and, from the bank, try to wave the *Johnny Boy* in, try to warn it of the danger at the dock up the river. But that plan held short life. For river captains, under no circumstances, would send a boat out to heed such a call. Hostile Indians had used that plan too often to lure a boat into ambush and robbery. No, that would never work.

Then what would work? They had only until tomorrow in which to do something, he realized. That night Broken Foot, although tired from her chopping, cooked for the three men. She said something to Spotted Hawk, speaking in broken Crow.

Weber asked, "What did she say, Johnson?"

Johnson was frowning. Finally he admitted, "I don't know. They didn't talk Sioux. They talked Blackfoot, I think."

Weber spoke to Lowe. "Do you know what the squaw said?"

Lowe was chewing on boiled pemmican. "Sounded like Blackfoot to me, too. But hell, I cain't understan' it." He went back to his meal.

"Let 'em talk," Johnson said. "Talk never hurt nobody."

From then on, Spotted Hawk, who knew but little of the Crow tongue, talked to his wife in that language, stumbling over words, fumbling for others. There were rifles, he said, back in the timber. She knew that and she nodded. She was afraid he would get killed. She told him that. He tried to console her by joking and saying her fears were groundless.

For he and Mack Wilson, as a precaution against attack, had hidden two rifles and some ammunition, wrapping the rifles in canvas and strapping them to pine trees, the rifles in the lower boughs and hidden by the needles. They had thought, if they were ever driven by the Sioux or Crow from their wood-cutting

post, if they lost their rifles in a surprise attack, they would have the hidden rifles to fall back on.

Bears had been bothering them the last few years, sneaking into camp while they were back cutting timber, and they had made one or two deadfalls, and they had trapped a number of bears in these. These were pits some twenty feet in the ground, covered with small logs spaced three feet apart. Over the logs were placed buckbrush and over this was sprinkled a half-foot covering of sod. The bears, unsuspectingly, had walked across these, and tumbled into the pits. Now Spotted Hawk found himself remembering these two deadfalls.

Dawn could not come soon enough, for the night was chilly yet with spring. Outside, the three men watched their cabin, and they heard them stir in the night, and they heard them talk. From their talk he realized his assumption had been correct: there were men on the *Johnny Boy*, working to sabotage from inside. And these three, it seemed, had other pack mules, back in the brush. They had been, with the exception of the one who'd been to Fort Peck, around this country for a week or so.

Next morning, on the open fire in front of the cabin, Broken Foot cooked breakfast, and they ate with the three talking now and then, and with Spotted Hawk saying little.

Weber said, "Why don't you talk, Injun?"

Spotted Hawk replied, "What is there I can say?"

Weber studied him. "Look, Injun, it works this way. When the *Johnny Boy* heaves into sight the five of us are working with axes, see? We're part of the crew, understand?"

Spotted Hawk nodded.

"You try to holler and warn the *Johnny Boy* as it comes in, and I'll kill you myself. That goes for you too, squaw."

Broken Foot did not answer.

"We need logs to cut," Spotted Hawk said. "We have none on the bank. We have to get some back in the brush."

Lowe laughed a little. "Don't let a log fall on you, an' break in your in your skull!"

Broken Foot glanced at her husband. She was frowning in wonder, and Spotted Hawk, too, was wondering. What did the man mean by that remark?

"We stay around and do nothin' this mornin'," Weber ordered. "This afternoon, we get a few logs, lay them on the bank, and wait. When she comes we act like we're working. We can hope our other men have taken over the boat, but if they haven't we have to make things look natural here. We can board it then, and work from inside, ourselves."

"They'll have taken over the scow," Lowe assured.

Weber said, "We got to play things sure from this angle."

They got a blanket out of the cabin and sat playing cards. Broken Foot went into the cabin, and noon came. The sun was warm but not hot, and there was a slow wind. Broken Foot cooked again, talking in her broken Crow, and Spotted Hawk told her of his plan.

She nodded, but she was frightened. This showed in her face and in her trembling hands. The meal finished, she took the dirty dishes to the river, with Lowe watching her. Weber and Johnson started toward the blanket again, ready to resume their game, and Spotted Hawk, catching his moment, ran for the buckbrush.

The distance was about seventy feet. He ran the way a deer runs; he traveled with great leaps. Run, mocassins, run! Be still, mocassins, and make no noise! Run, mocassins, run! Bullets, don't hit me! Guns, don't shoot! He heard something whine; he saw the uplifted barrel of Lowe's gun go down as Broken Foot pulled against it. He heard her, dim and far away: "Run, husband, run!"

"You fools, he's gettin' away!" That was Lowe's voice.

How long does it take for mocassins to cover this distance? How long is the time between the live and the dead? Should I look back and waste a fraction of time, and should I look

back and look into eternity? No, let the bullets come: one has come and gone past me.

He came into the buckbrush, with the thorns of wild rosebushes pulling at his buckskins. He heard a rifle talk again and again, and another talked also. But they were shooting by guess, for the brush was protecting him now, and he was going toward the rifle, strapped to the pine.

He heard Lowe say, "I'll get him. He can't do much. He hasn't a gun. I'll get him, and bring him back or kill him."

Spotted Hawk went up the tree and got the rifle. He unstrapped it and took the canvas from it, catching the box of cartridges as it fell from the wrappings. He had a rifle. He had hope. He had a chance. He put cartridges in it.

Lowe came along the path. He dog-trotted, reading sign, and Spotted Hawk watched, hidden by wild rosebushes, his rifle on the man. Lowe came to the deadfall. His right foot came down, it went through; he screamed and turned, other foot reaching for a hold. Then he was gone, down into the pit. He could not climb out. He was hollering, but the sound, muffled by the earth, was not strong. But they heard it.

One said, "Hang tight, Lowe."

They did not come running to him. They were not that foolish. As it was, it took Spotted Hawk almost two hours to get them both. They played a sniper's game, moving through the brush; they soon found out he had a rifle. For Johnson, the knowledge brought death, for he fell within the rifle's sights; for Weber, it brought a stumbling, slow halt.

And when the *Johnny Boy* came in to dock, Broken Foot alone waved the river-packet in. Weber lay on the bank, feet tied but his hands free, the bandage around his chest, and beside him sat the Sioux, Spotted Hawk, watching the Missouri river queen glide in.

She was everything they had said. She was the queen, red and shiny with her paint and brass, and she rode the waters like she was born there. If she had had trouble on her maiden trip, she did not show it, for she was proud. And her captain stood and waved to Broken Foot.

"Where is your husband and Old Mack?"

"Old Mack is dead," the squaw said. "My husband is wounded."

ALMOST A month later, after the Blackfoot rebellion had been put down, there on the broad deck of the *Johnny Boy,* Colonel Smith, the former Major Smith, read an army citation. Army men stood at stiff attention, lining the rails of the river queen, their guns rigid and shining in the sun, and beyond the rim of the ship civilians stood on the Fort Benton dock, listening to the Colonel's booming voice.

"And to Mr. Mack Wilson, who lies in his grave on the hill we see to our north, the United States Army and the Government of the United States does award, posthumously, this Medal of Courage, for his part played in the Blackfoot Rebellion, the part he played with courage and devotion, and for which he gave his life. I award this metal to the Sioux woman, Broken Foot, to keep in her possession at all times."

Broken Foot glanced uneasily at Spotted Hawk.

"You go forward now," he said.

The day before, in the court-room of the army post, he had seen Lowe and Weber convicted of murdering Mack Wilson, for the old woodcutter

had stumbled on their camp. They had clubbed him and then dropped a tree, making it look as though the tree had killed him. They had silenced him forever. That morning they had been hanged.

The Army had asked him to witness the executions but he had not attended.

"And to Captain Milton Myers, captain of the river-packet *Johnny Boy*, a grateful Government, in recognition, of Captain Myers' courage and the courage of his crew, who, fighting pirates aboard their own ship, saved the rifles and ammunition needed to bring peace to the Frontier, I present this Medal—"

Yes, they had fought on the *Johnny Boy*. They had fought with rifles and pistols and knives. But when the packet had sailed into the dock to meet Broken Foot, the decks had been cleared; the Captain had been in command.

"And to the Sioux, Spotted Hawk, the devoted companion of deceased Mack Wilson, a grateful Government and a grateful Army does *not* award a medal, for a medal is something to only cherish, and not for useful purposes."

The Colonel cleared his throat. The sun was bright, the air warm, the crowd silent.

"To Spotted Hawk, then, the Government and the Army, in grateful esteem, this new Winchester repeating rifle, with the message carved on its barrel. And in addition the Army, as an added measure, hereby commissions Spotted Hawk to have full charge of his woodcutting post, post number twenty-seven, said Spotted Hawk also having full charge of all crews working there. This rank is to be held by him forever, or whenever he, of his own volition, sees fit to withdraw."

Broken Foot whispered, "Go forward."

Spotted Hawk took the rifle, holding it by barrel and stock. The barrel was blue-steel, the inscription fine on its blueness; the stock was polished walnut, sleek to his touch. He breathed deeply, the pain of his wound still touching his chest. He wanted to say something grand. He wanted to speak in English. But he couldn't.

So he said, in Sioux, "Thank you, sir."

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Real Western published bi-monthly at Holyoke Mass., for October 1, 1947

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Real Western and that the followng is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y. Business Manager, Maurice Coyne. 241 Church Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily publications only.)

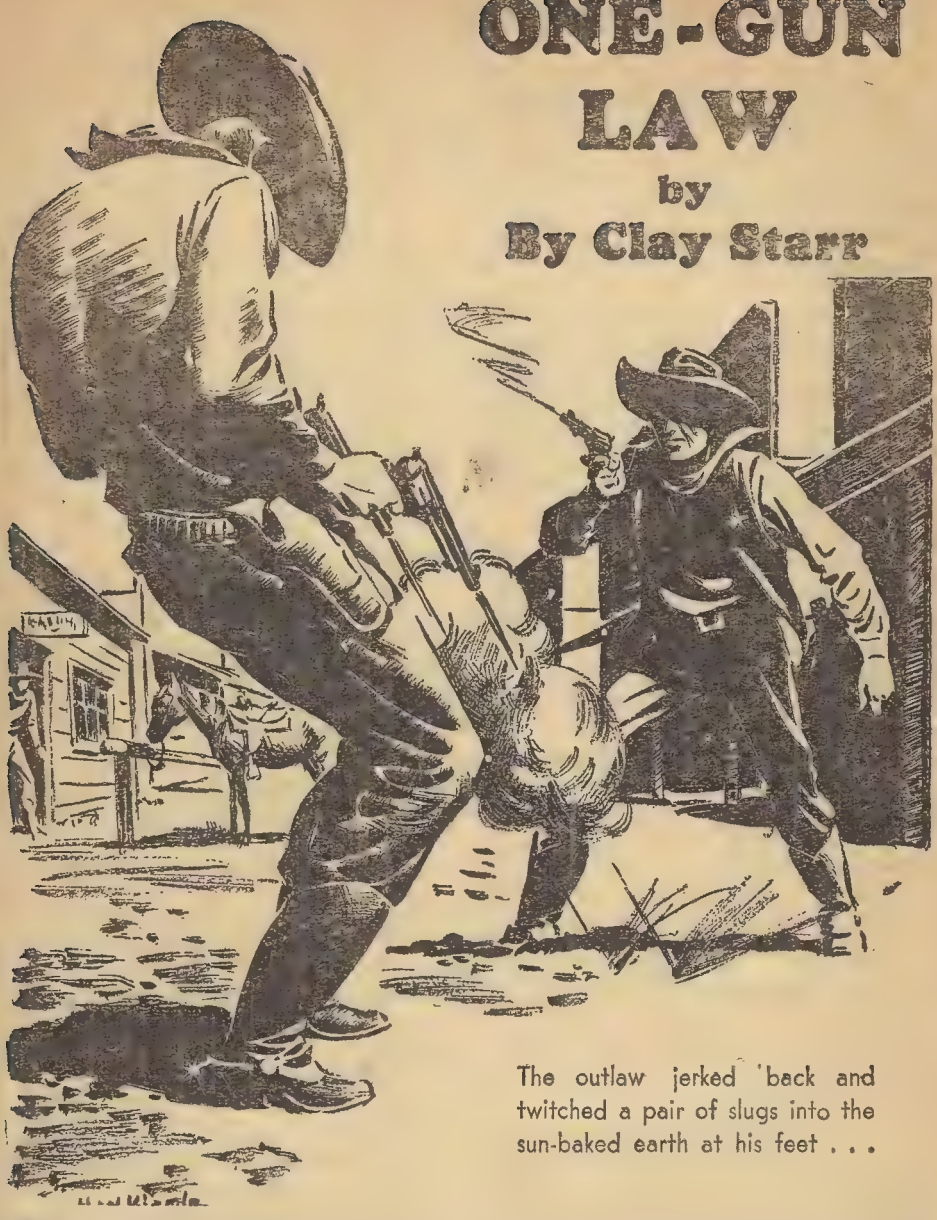
LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher.)

Sworn to and subcribed before me this 12th day of September, 1947. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) (SEAL)

ONE-GUN LAW

by

By Clay Starr



The outlaw jerked back and twitched a pair of slugs into the sun-baked earth at his feet . . .

THE WILD Bunch stared silently when Jim Ferber rode past the Legal Tender saloon and dismounted at the tie-rail in front of the Marshal's office. The outlaws glanced knowingly at each other, and every man in the gang carressed the butts of their twin six-shooters.

Dutch Sam Speigel was a big man in his early thirties, and the unchallenged leader of the gang. It was Dutch Sam who had killed Marshal George Crum, and no one in town had wanted Crum's vacated office. Now there was a candidate from out of town, and Jim Ferber was listening as old Judge Tom Wilson out-

Jim Ferber had to send five men to Boot Hill to prove that One-Gun Law could outdraw a Two-Gun Outlaw every time . . .

lined the duties which would be his if he accepted the post as Marshal of Abilene.

"There's a fairly recent law against discharging firearms in the city limits," the white-haired jurist told Ferber. "The boys disregard this law when they get a bit too much forty-rod under their belts. One thing always leads to another, and Boot Hill is becoming entirely too populous. Worst of it is, most of the deceased are respectable citizens!"

Jim Ferber listened without comment. He wasn't big as to physical stature; five-feet-nine, and he weighed about a hundred and fifty-five. His age was a year or two under thirty, and he wore only one gun strapped low on his right leg. He was smooth-shaven in a land where most men wore cow-horn mustaches, and his voice was low and quiet when he spoke. But his tawny-gray eyes were the give-away; they looked right through a man without wavering.

"We paid George Crum a hundred a month and shells," Judge Wilson told Ferber. "Not a man in Abilene will take the job, and I'm offering you two hundred!"

"You've hired a man, Judge," Ferber accepted without hesitation. "It would have been some easier if your town committee had prohibited the carrying of weapons in Abilene, but no matter. Where do I spread my bed-roll?"

"Better use that back room behind your office," Judge Wilson suggested, and he stared hard at the burnished Colt .45 in the new Marshal's holster. "Better get you another shooting iron, even if you only pack it for a spare," he advised.

"I never needed but one in El Paso or Tombstone," Ferber said shortly, as he pinned the ball-pointed star to his faded vest. "A man can't to his best work when he has too much on his mind, and one gun is all I ever needed!"

Dutch Sam Speigel coughed suggestively when the new marshal came out of the office of the Judge. Speigel had just won a toss-up with Twins Malone, a scatted-face killer from Dodge City. The two men had tossed a dollar for first chance at Jim Freber who was untieing his bed-roll from the cantle of his saddle.

Twins Malone had wanted that first chance at the new law, but he had lost the toss with his own silver dollar. Now he threw the coin high into the air, and Dutch Sam made his double pass for the two six-shotters riding in his buscadero holsters.

Like the flash of bright sun from a mirror, Jim Ferber's Peacemaker .45 cleared leather. The long-barrelled six-shooter roared gustily before Speigel's guns had cleared leather. The silver dollar pinged and flipped spinning through the hot Kansas air.

The startled bad-men in front of the Legal Tender stared at the battered dollar which fell to the ground near Dutch Sam Speigel. When they turned to study the new marshal, Jim Ferber was carrying his bed-roll toward his office, and his gun was snugged deep in holster leather.

FERBER laid his bed-tarp on the board sidewalk and walked slowly up to the five badmen. He looked each man over slowly and without threat. Then he called each by name.

"Dutch Sam, Nations Bassett, Waco Bane, Bisbee Jenkins and Twins Malone," he recited quietly. "Every one of you a killer, and wanted by the law in one place or another. Just wanted to tell you boys that I'm wearing George Crum's old star, and it's again the law to discharge yore hardware in the city limits. Course, none of you has done so since I pinned on the star, and mebbe so you won't!"

Dutch Sam hawed in his throat and pulled on his long mustaches. Then he stepped away from the tie-rail with his elbows spread wide, and his big hands shadowing the grips of his belt guns.

"I bought first chance," the big killer announced bluntly. "Trick shooting won't win you no arguments with me, Mister One-Gun Law!"

"Hold it, Dutch!" Ferber warned

swiftly. "You killed Marshal George Crum on a sneak, but I'm looking straight at you!"

"One chance I give you," Dutch Sam almost whispered. "Tie your bed on your hoss and light a shuck back to Tombstone!"

"And if I don't?" Ferber asked slowly.

"Boot Hill for you!" Dutch Sam answered viciously. "Well?"

"I'm staying," Ferber spoke softly, but now his eyes were like glare ice. "Your move!"

Dutch Sam thrust out his jaw, and his wide shoulders stooped into the gun-fighter's crouch. Then his two big hands pistoned down to the notched guns in his holsters with the speed of long practice.

Jim Ferber watched with his head turned slightly to the side. Like the flipping dip of a net, his right hand scooped the six-shooter from his holster, whipped up level with his right eye while his thumb was curling back the hammer, and the Texas pistol belched pale flame just as Dutch Sam's twin guns leaped from the holsters.

The tall outlaw jerked back and twitched a pair of slugs into the sun-baked earth at his feet. The smoking guns fell from his hands, and Dutch Sam followed them to the ground like a tall pine which had been cut off at the base. He stirred up a cloud of red dust which mingled with the acrid smoke of his useless sixshooters, and the toss of his rusty boots rattled a time or two before the dust had settled.

Marshal Jim Ferber faced the stunned outlaws with his smoke-grimed Peacemaker in his hand. His voice was calm and low as he watched the four killers with an invitation in his tawny-gray eyes.

"One down, and four to go! Any more heroes in this wolf pack?"

Waco Bane glanced at Twins Malone, but the stocky killer shrugged carelessly.

"It was a fair go-around, and Dutch Sam asked for showdown!" Malone stated coldly. "I'll match you for the drinks, Waco," and he turned his back and walked into the Legal Tender.

Jim Ferber smiled grimly as the other three desperadoes followed Twins Malone. Then he holstered his gun, hooked his fingers in the collar of Dutch Sam's shirt, dragged the dead outlaw to the board sidewalk, and picked up the dead man's guns.

There would be an inquest, but that was up to the Coroner. His job was to maintain law and order, and Jim Ferber went back to his bedroll and carried it inside his office. Judge Wilson had told him that he was drawing fighting pay, and Twins Malone had called the fight a fair shake.

LIKE A master craftsman, Jim Ferber was taking care of his tools. He cleaned his six-shooter and fingered five new cartridges with his oily fingers. He slipped the shells through the leading gate, set the hammer on an empty, replaced the weapon, and shaped the holster to the burnished frame.

As he worked, Ferber watched the door of his office. Not that he was afraid that any of the wolf pack would shoot him without warning. He knew that none of the four lacked for courage, and each was proud of his prowess with his tools. According to the *unwritten* law, every man was entitled to a chance for his taw, just as every man who packed a gun was supposed to know how to use it.

Jim Ferber knew that every one of the four killers had what was known along the frontier as "gun pride". Ferber nodded his well-shaped head; he had it himself. Neither did it trouble him that all four were wanted by the law in one place or another. A man could be wanted for a killing in Texas, and wear the law-star in Arizona or bloody Kansas.

Many a good lawman was called outlaw, according to the political powers-that-be at the time. But each wild town along the lawless frontier had to make and maintain its own laws. They hired the most fearless men they could get, paid them well, and their tenure of office depended upon both speed and skill.

Ferber carefully washed his hands to remove every trace of oil. He pulled his gray Stetson low over his eyes before he stepped out into the noonday sun. A quick glance at the tie rail in front of the saloon showed him that the body of Dutch Sam had been removed by Funeral Talbot, and then Ferber stiffened slightly.

Waco Bane and Bisbee Jenkins were standing at the far end of the Legal Tender saloon, which was only three doors away from the Marshal's office. Both men had been drinking, but there was a difference between them.

Bisbee Jenkins had his hat pushed to the back of his balding head, and he was scowling with disappointment. Waco Bane was smiling, and his Stetson was pulled low to shade his narrowed greenish eyes.

Jim Ferber read all he needed to know at a glance. One of the two was a winner; the other had lost at some game of chance. Then Ferber saw a card stuck in the snake-band of Bane's high-crowned Stetson. The Ace of Spades. Lying under the tie rail was the Deuce of Spades, near the feet of Bisbee Jenkins.

Ferber stopped when Waco Bane cleared his throat, preparatory to speaking. The sun glittered on the law badge pinned to the marshal's vest.

"You ever hear of Coe Banning?" Bane asked in a slow Texas drawl. "He was killed by a gun-sneak down El Paso way!"

JIM FERBER felt a pulse beating at the end of his right index finger. This was the build-up for a showdown, and the Texas man was confident of his own abilities. In fact, Waco Bane showed his eagerness in every line of his crouching figure.

"I knew Coe Banning," Ferber ansered quietly. "He killed a deputy down Texas way where I was wearing a star. I gave Banning a chance to surrender, but he went for his six-shooter instead!"

"What was good enough for Coe, is good enough for me," Bane said slowly. "I taken up for my pard!"

"Hold it!" Ferber said stormly. "And don't cloud the sign, Waco. You and Bisbee played Acey-Deucey for the chance to bait me into a gun ruckus. You won, and you've got the death card stuck in yore hat!"

"That there's reading sign with the best," Bane agreed without hesitation. "How you want it?"

"You're drunk, Bane," Ferber said slowly. "See me some time when you know what yo're doing!"

"He knows what he's doing!" Bisbee Jenkins put in roughly. "Or mebbe yore sand run out!"

Jim Ferber stiffened as a flush of anger stained his bronzed cheeks. His eyes were watching Waco Bane who was now in a crouch with both hands taloned above his twin sixes. And once again the pulse began to pound in the trigger finger of Jim Ferber's right hand.

From the corner of his eye he saw the tall spare frame of Judge Tom Wilson in the door of the Justice's Court. Other townsmen were watching from doorways and windows. Almost imperceptibly, Jim Ferber turned his lean body from the left to thin the target he made, and then Waco Bane struck him like a startled rattler.

Both taloned hands rapped down for the black-butted guns on his lean thighs. Gun barrels hissed against oiled leather and flashed in the bright overhead sun.

Jim Ferber slashed down for his holster, his hand moving like a flash of heat lightning. Even as he made his draw, he knew that the outcome was going to be close.

The guns belched flame at the same time, but only one of them was in the hands of Waco Bane. His left-handed gun exploded when Ferber's slug struck him down like a pole-axed steer, and a bullet from Bane's right-hand gun licked at the edge of his outflung vest.

Waco Bane did a back flip to land on his broad shoulders under the Legal Tender tie rail. His long legs straightened convulsively, and then the toss of his worn boots sagged outward. A pool of blood began to form under his shoulders while Jim

Ferber held his smoking gun ready for a follow-up that would not be needed.

Now the pulse had died down in his trigger finger!

"Yo're the best!" Bisbee Jenkins said judiciously. "Waco won the death card, and it brought him bad luck!"

He turned abruptly on one worn heel, strolled slowly across the boardwalk, and pushed through the batwing doors of the Legal Tender.

Jim Ferber smiled frostily, and without mirth. He jacked the spent shell from his gun, thuimbed a fresh cartridge through the loading gate, holstered the smoke-grimed weapon, and shook his shoulders to fit his vest. Then he walked on down to the Long Horn restaurant and took a seat at a table with his back against a side wall.

He glanced up when a tall man took a chair beside him. Judge Tom Wilson nodded and spoke quietly.

"Two down, and three to go. I'm glad you are not quarrelsome, Marshal!"

LOUD VOICES came from the Legal Tender saloon as Marshal Jim Ferber was walking back to his office from the lunch room. Ferber slowed his stride with his head turned to catch the drift of the heated argument floating over the swinging batwing doors of the big saloon. Then he moved up closer when he recognized the voices of the disputants.

"It's my go-around!" he heard Bisbee Jenkins declare angrily. "Me and Waco played high-low for the chance to take seconds on that badge-totin' gun swift from Tombstone. Then he won, but that gives me the next chance!"

"Gwan, he's got you faded," Nations Bassett growled in a low deep voice. "You and Waco allowed that Coe Banning was a pard of yores. Mebbe he was, one place or another, but me and Coe pulled that job together outside El Paso. They never did catch up to me, and I had to high-tail out of Texas. This is my chance to tally for pore Coe Banning!"

Jim Ferber straightened his back and raised his head. He wasn't a drinking man, but he shouldered quietly through the swinging doors and stopped at the end of the bar. He ordered a small beer and let it stand on the wet mahogany as he watched the two outlaws continue their private quarrel.

Neither man had seen him enter the saloon, and now they were intent on nothing but watching each other. Twins Malone saw the marshal, but the scar-faced desperado gave no sign. He stood apart from the pair, a glass of brandy in his left hand, and only a mild interest expressed on his ugly features.

"I'm bracing the marshal," Bisbee Jenkins declared flatly. "It's either him or us!"

"Him or me," Bassett corrected harshly. "Or else, it's me and you!"

Jim Ferber made no attempt to interfere. If he did, he would be between a cross-fire, with Twins Malone sitting on the side-lines with sixes full to copper an outlaw bet. A sure-thing bet, and as yet, no law had been violated.

"So it's you and me," Bisbee Jenkins answered Bassett. "So Coe Banning and you did a job together, and you ran out on him. He got a .45 slug through the ticker, and like as not you got away with all the loot!"

"Make yore pass, owl-hooter," Bassett whispered hoarsely. "I'll play what I catch on the draw!"

Bisbee Jenkins was proud of the fact that he was a two-gun man. He had often boasted that he could shoot as good with one hand as the other. Now his two hands whipped down to his holstered guns with dazzling speed, but the treacherous Bassett played an Ace-in-the-hole.

Nations Bassett shook his right arm, and flame lanced from his hand as the spiteful crack of a small derringer shattered the stillness of the saloon. The hide-out gun barked again just as Bisbee Jenkins got his guns free of leather, and the heavy weapons bellowed thunderously and

kicked a pair of harmless slugs into the sawdust-covered planking.

Bisbee Jenkins jerked his head and coughed. A small black dot leaped to his forehead between his staring gray eyes. Then he unhinged at the knees and tumbled slowly. He half-turned as his rubbery knees touched the floor, sagged down on his back, and drummed his heels in the filthy sawdust.

Jim Ferber stalked forward like a great cat, his law-gun in his hand. He stopped three paces behind Nations Bassett who was leering down at his victim with the murder gun clutched in his grimy fist. It was a two-shot derringer, and the two shots had been fired.

"You're under arrest!" Ferber said grimly. "Anything you say will be used against you!"

Nations Bassett turned slowly with a snarled curse whispering from his twisting lips. He was caught flat-footed, and he knew it. With a useless derringer in his hand, and both six-shooters snugged down in his holsters.

"I settled an argument with Bisbee," Bassett said angrily. "Now I can settle with you. You claim to be fast with your cutter!"

"You never heard me say I was," Ferber contradicted. "You discharged a firearm within the city limits, and you're going to the calabozo!"

"Holster up and draw me evens," Bassett taunted. "On an even break, it will take more than one gun to walk me to jail!"

Ferber flushed and stepped close to his prisoner. "Start walking, or I'll slap you to sleep with my hog-leg and drag you to jail!" He threatened sternly.

"Better walk, Nations," Twins Malone advised. "Yore fine will be twenty-five and costs, and tomorrow is another day!"

Nations Bassett smiled wolfishly and nodded his shaggy head. Jim Ferber reached out with his left hand and took the smoke-grimed derringer. Then he jerked his head toward the swinging doors, and Bassett walked ahead without resistance.

JUDGE Wilson glanced up from some papers on his bench when Ferber herded Bassett into the Court room. Several townsmen followed the pair, took places along the rear wall, and watched with grim faces. The Dutch Sam gang were known to be rustlers and bandits, and they had treed the Abilene law for two long years.

"What's the charge, marshal?" Judge Wilson asked sternly. "I heard the sound of firearms from the Legal Tender!"

"The charge is... Murder, Your Honor!" Ferber answered without hesitation. "The accused and Bisbee Jenkins got into an argument; both called for showdown, but it wasn't an even shake. The accused shook a hide-out gun down his right sleeve; shot Bisbee Jenkins between the eyes. There were twenty witnesses to the crime!"

"You can't do this to me!" Bassett shouted. "I came along peaceful because I figured I was getting fined for discharging firearms within the city limits!"

"You'll get a fair trial," Judge Wilson assured the glowering prisoner. "I remand him to jail in your custody, Marshal. Hold him for trial without bond!"

"Me and the boys will testify again that killer," a townsman spoke up heartily. "And we'll help pull on the rope to choke that killing rustler to death!"

Nations Bassett listened and his sallow face drained of color. Then he slapped for his twin guns, whirling at the same time.

But Jim Ferber had been watching the prisoner, and he slapped down with the barrel of his law-gun. Bassett moaned and crumpled to the floor. Ferber picked the outlaw's holsters, and placed the captured guns on Judge Wilson's desk.

"I'll hold him for trial without bond. Your Honor," he said quietly, and hooking his hands in Bassett's collar, he dragged the unconscious

man through a side door and into the cell block of the jail.

Twins Malone was an interested spectator at the murder trial. Judge Wilson had cut red tape, and now it was only thirty-six hours after the death of Bisbee Jenkins. Malone had made no trouble for the new marshal; the two had not even spoken since the arrest.

Nations Bassett was in the prisoner's box, and he wore handcuffs on his bony wrists. Marshal Jim Ferber stated the charge, and the Coroner was acting as the prosecuting attorney.

Doc Brady was a little man of cold nerve and determined mien. He called a dozen witnesses who testified that Nations Bassett had killed the deceased without giving him a chance.

Bassett told his story, claiming that he acted in self defense. Jim Ferber was watching Twins Malone, and he saw a sneer curl the lips of the scar-faced killer.

The Judge dismissed the prisoner from the stand, gave instructions to the jury, and called a recess when the twelve men filed out to a back room. They were absent less than ten minutes when Judge Wilson again called the court to order.

"Gentlemen of the Jury, have you arrived at a decision?" the Judge asked.

"We have, Your Honor," the foreman answered promptly. "We find the accused Guilty as charged!"

"The prisoner will stand up and face the bar!" the Judge ordered.

Nations Bassett stood up, and now his hands were trembling. His shoulders were stooped, and he seemed to have aged ten years in less than two days since his arrest.

"You have been found guilty of murder by a jury of your peers," Judge Wilson announced coldly. "It is my duty to pass sentence upon you. I hereby order that you be hanged by the neck until you are dead... And may God have mercy on your soul!"

JIM FERBER felt old for the first time in his twenty-eight years. It had been his duty to spring the trap which had plunged Nations Bassett into eternity, and the ordeal had left a marked imprint upon the marshal of Abilene.

It wasn't like facing a known killer who was fighting for his life. Right or wrong, a man had *pride* on his side in a six-shooter showdown. Ferber shrugged his shoulders irritably. He shuddered when a long black wagon left the stockade which enclosed the gallows. Funeral Talbot sat on the driver's seat, and there would be another new grave in Boot Hill.

The marshal mounted his horse and rode along a back street toward the jail. He rode up an alley to the corral, dismounted, stripped his riding gear, and started for his office.

A stocky wide-shouldered man stepped out from the corner of the jail. "A minute, Marshal!" he called. "I want a word with you!"

Jim Ferber faced Twins Malone, and some of the weight was lifted from the marshal's heavy shoulders. His tawny-gray eyes flickered to the twin guns in the outlaw's holsters. The butts had been set carefully, pointing slightly out for a quick draw.

"I always give a man a chance," Malone began slowly. "I'm giving you four hours to leave town!"

Jim Ferber drew a deep breath and smiled coldly. "I was going to look you up for the same reason," he told Malone. "You're the last of the Wild Bunch. I'm giving you until sundown to leave town!"

"Looks like a draw so far," Malone remarked carelessly. "If you are here at sundown, I'm coming to get you!"

"Check!" Ferber answered with a nod. "If you haven't left town by sundown, I'll start for the Legal Tender to find you!"

"Keno!" Malone agreed. "I've been thinking, Marshal. Don't seem fair to handicap you this way. I've always used two guns up till now, but I'll give you a chance. I can use either hand, and I'll only use *one* gun. It's up to you to guess which one!"

"You're smart, Malone," Ferber answered gravely. "When a feller uses two guns at the same time, he's got twice as much to think about. This cuts down his speed by half, and I'll feel better about the whole thing, knowing you will be doing your best. If you don't change your mind, better see Funeral Talbot about the necessary arrangements!"

Twins Malone smiled and nodded his head. The eight notches whittled on the handles of his killer guns were mute evidence to the fact that he was a veteran at powder-smoke showdown. Anger slows up a man's muscles, and up to now, Twins Malone had never shot... *second.*

SUNDOWN! The Main Street of Abilene was devoid of horses and men alike. The sun hung in the west like a great red ball of fire. Faces could be seen at all the windows fronting the street which had been cleared for action. Deadly action, and a test between the law and the lawless.

Jim Ferber appeared in the door of his office. He glanced at the sun which he would have to face. He pulled his Stetson low over his tawny-gray eyes, twitched his six-shooter with the tips of his fingers, and stepped to the board walk.

From the Legal Tender saloon three doors down the street, another wide-shouldered man stepped into the clear. His twin six-shooters caught the red glow of the sun and glittered like bloody rubies.

Both men walked to the center of the red dusty street. Both turned at the same time, although they were not watching each other. Both started the walk of death without hurry, but with purposeful stride. While men behind shuttered windows watched and held their laboring breaths.

The *unwritten law* of old Judge Colt was about to be given another test. No arrangements had been made, because none were necessary. These men were warriors, and gun-proud. They knew the rules, and would abide strictly by them.

Ten paces was always the prescribed distance. Neither man would take an advantage. They fought for something bigger to them than right or wrong; their test would be for speed and accuracy. When the smoke cleared away, there would be no need for a jury trial. As they saw it, personal honor was at stake, and they would fight in self defense.

Jim Ferber was watching the scarred face of Twins Malone as the distance lessened between them. Those twin guns fascinated the marshal. He had never met a gun-fighter who could use either hand with facility, but perhaps there was always a first time.

Both men stopped as though at a given signal. Jim Ferber had nothing to conceal. He was wearing one gun, and he turned his left shoulder in to thin the target he presented. He watched for Twins Malone to give a tip-off, but the two-gun man faced him squarely with both hands taloned above the notched guns on his powerful legs.

Then Funeral Yalbot walked out from the little store where he sold furniture when not otherwise engaged. Talbot was a tall spare man, dressed in a black broadcloth suit with tails. He wore a black flat-crowned Stetson which he now removed from his bald head. He was standing on the high board walk between the two grim gun-swifts, and both could see him without removing their eyes from the other.

Funeral Talbot made no explanation. None was needed. He extended his right arm holding his hat by the crown. Jim Ferber was leaning forward a trifle, and again the pulse was beating at the tip of his trigger finger. Twins Malone had hunched his wide shoulders, and he was bent a little at the knees.

Funeral Talbot held his position while a man could have counted up to five. Then the undertaker opened his fingers. His black hat fell straight to the ground.

Jim Ferber stabbed down and twined his supple fingers around the grips of his law-gun. He was watching the hands of Twins Malone as he

(Continued On Page 105)

Hell At Starvation Camp

Fact Article by Harry Van Demark

FROM Springfield, Illinois, to Starvation Camp at the base of bleak Donner Summit was an arduous trip in 1846, when only the faintest of trails led the way westward over plains and rugged mountains. But the Donner party was a happy and prosperous one when it set out in April of that year for California.

Two brothers, George and Jacob Donner, and their families numbering sixteen persons, together with James F. Reed and a family of seven, and another family of twelve formed the original group that left Sangamon County, Illinois.

At Independence, Missouri, they were joined by additional recruits to the wagon train. The party in all then numbered ninety persons, but by the first week in May, after they had reached Independence, the train increased to over two hundred wagons, all well provisioned and extremely well outfitted for the long journey westward.

At Fort Bridger in Wyoming a portion of the immigrants decided to try a new route to California by way of Salt Lake. This was known as the Hastings Cutoff. The remaining members of the party took the longer but better known route by which they eventually reached their destination.

Those who chose the Salt Lake route were the ones whose tragic fate led them to Starvation Camp—a place of horror and hardship that has become one of the darkest pages in the history of the westward expansion. The great desert beyond Salt Lake was a trackless, barren and foreboding place. From that point misfortunes laid hand heavily upon the wagon train whose supplies were diminishing.

When their plight became apparent, a party of volunteers was called upon to ride ahead seven hundred miles to Sutter's Fort on the Sacramento, a mission which, if successful, would bring back supplies to save the lives of those in the wagon train. When the weary travelers reached Gravelly Ford on the Humboldt in Nevada, the worn out travelers and cattle were subsisting on short rations.

At Gravelly Ford, John Snyder, who was driving one of the teams, became involved in a quarrel with James F. Reed. During the fight Snyder lashed at Reed with the front end of a whip, and Mrs. Reed, who was rushing in to separate the two combatants, received the cruel blow intended for her husband.

Enraged at this incident, Reed stabbed Snyder, who died a short time later as a result of the wound. For this murder Reed was banished from the wagon train without food or a gun. At that time he was well over seven hundred miles from the nearest settlement, which was over the Sierras in California.

During the first night after his banishment, a friend, accompanied by Reed's little daughter, stole away from the wagon train and provided him with provisions. But for these supplies he would have perished in the desert. However, the food was enough to enable him to make his way westward and over the Sierras before the heavy winter snows set in.

The banishment of Reed from the Donner party left it without one of its best leaders and was one of the main reasons why the party tarried too long in the Truckee meadows and was unable to get over Donner Pass before heavy winter weather descended on the scene.

Strange it was that Reed, who was banished from the wagon train, was one of those who reached safety and eventually became one of the leaders of the rescue parties who went back to relieve the suffering of the Donner party.

Juan Flaco's Ride

By John L. Cooney

No one has ever written an epic poem about the ride of Juan Flaco, but someone certainly should. By comparison, Paul Revere's famous ride shrivels to a tame midnight canter through Central Park.

IT WAS September 24, 1846 in the sleepy little pueblo of Los Angeles in Mexico's "Department of California"—but the pueblo wasn't very sleepy that day.

The United States had been at war with Mexico since May. Some six weeks before this fateful September day, Fremont and Stockton had marched into Los Angeles with bands playing and flags waving to notify the little pueblo that it was captured—to which no one objected. Then they marched away leaving a young Marine lieutenant, Archibald Gillespie, with fifty men to guard their conquered realm.

Every time Gillespie saw two *caballeros* talking, he thought a revolt was brewing. He ordered the citizens to remain indoors at night, required military passes to enter or leave the city, issued a series of threatening proclamations and generally made a pest of himself. He finally topped off his accomplishments by arresting three of the pueblo's leading citizens as hostages to insure the good behavior of the town. Gillespie may not have known he had been entrusted with a hornet's nest—or if he did, he was ignorant of the habits of the hornet.

The Angelenos revolted, driving Gillespie into trenches on Fort Hill overlooking the town. The revolt grew and within twelve hours, Gillespie found himself in a serious predicament. There was no food and very little water and ammunition.

Gillespie realized that his only hope was to get word to Commodore Stockton in Monterey, some 400 miles north. Gillespie appreciated the dangers of attempting to send a message to Stockton. Even if the messenger should manage to elude the besieging force, the route would be through country in which every inhabitant must be looked upon as an enemy. Nevertheless, he asked for volunteers.

"I think I'd probably be the best man to send, Lieutenant." The speaker was a slight, middle-aged Swedish sailor named John Brown—better known as Juan Flaco ("Skinny John"). Juan Flaco had served in the British navy, fought with Bolivar in South America and had served as a soldier-of-fortune in several of the revolutionary armies in Mexico.

Gillespie would have preferred sending a younger man, but Juan Flaco's ability to speak Spanish like a native outweighed other factors.

IT WAS eight o'clock at night, that September 4th, when Juan Flaco started from the trenches at a point near where the Los Angeles City Hall now stands. Juan Flaco carried no weapons except a riata—if that could be called a weapon. In the band of his sombrero was a small pack of cigarette papers on one of which Gillespie had written, "Believe the bearer!"

The plan was for Juan Flaco to convince the Californians that he was a deserter. But he never got the chance.

With a whoop and a yell, fifteen lancers bore down on him. Juan Flaco took one look and lit out for Cahuenga Pass, with the lancers giving chase.

Juan Flaco, crouched low over his

horse's neck, stole a look over his shoulder. His pursuers were beginning to string out, but these Californians were not considered the finest horsemen in the world for nothing. His lead had already been cut in half and he'd traveled less than five miles.

With a muffled curse, Juan Flaco drove his spurs deeper into his horse's sides. Down the oak-lined El Camino Real through the now-famous San Fernando Valley they thundered, with Juan Flaco's lead slowly but surely being whittled away.

As he neared Calabasas, Juan Flaco risked another glance over his shoulder. Somewhere along the line, the pursuing caballeros had picked up some company. There seemed to be about twenty-five of them now. The leading riders were close enough so that Juan Flaco could see that only one of them had a gun, an old-fashioned blunderbuss that might have been used in the siege of Granada 400 years before. The rest were armed with lances.

"At least I'm lucky they don't have much in the way of guns," Juan Flaco muttered to himself as he plunged full-tilt down the bank of a small canyon.

But he had spoken too soon. As he rode up the other bank, the blunderbuss boomed with a roar like a cannon, belching a collection of rocks, nails and rusty bits of metal.

Juan Flaco felt his horse shudder. He jerked his feet from the stirrups, clearing the saddle and landing on his feet just as his mount stumbled to the ground bleeding profusely from half a dozen wounds. Pausing only long enough to grab his riata and snatch the bridle from the dying animal, Juan Flaco plunged into the undergrowth toward a small grove of oak trees some hundred yards away.

One of the caballeros stopped long enough to put the dying animal out of its misery while the others plunged on in pursuit. The heavy undergrowth hampered the horses, giving Juan Flaco just enough time to scramble up one of the gnarled oak trees and conceal himself in the heavy foliage.

Beneath him he could hear the caballeros stumbling around in the dark searching for him. Out on the road, the bright full moon had proved advantageous to the Californians, but here in the oak grove, the moonlight sifting through the branches was more of a hindrance than a help.

"Santa Maria, where could he have gone?"

"Do you think you hit him, Don Antonio?"

"You saw his horse, *mi capitan*. If I hit his horse, I don't see how I could have missed him. He probably crawled off someplace to die."

"*Es verdad*. Besides he can't do any harm without a horse. We'll return to the pueblo."

Juan Flaco crouched motionless listening to the lancers ride away. After a wait that seemed like hours, he peered carefully through the leaves. He listened carefully. The yapping of a coyote and the chirping of a few crickets were the only things he could hear.

He climbed out of the tree and crept back to the road, alert for any possible danger. The country was strange to Juan Flaco, but he knew that the road led to Santa Barbara where he could get further instructions from the Army garrison. He headed north, alternately running and walking.

THE SKY in the East was turning grey with the approaching dawn when Juan Flaco came to the top of a row of hills and saw a small cluster of buildings beneath him.

A ranch! He could see a corral with a few horses. He couldn't take any chances on being captured, but, on the other hand, he needed a horse to get him to Santa Barbara anyway.

He was within twenty feet of the corral when it happened. A dog, snarling and barking, rushed him. Juan Flaco dodged, swinging viciously with his riata. The dog turned and rushed again. The horses were snorting and stamping. Juan Flaco turned to make a run for it—but too late!

"Just stand right where you are, pardner!"

The speaker looked almost comical with a red and white nightcap perched precariously over one eye and holding his trousers up with one hand. But there was nothing comical about the .75-caliber "Brown Bess" musket he held cradled in his arm.

"Come on, friend, speak up. 'Pears to me like you're trying to steal a horse. Where I come from, we make short work of hoss thieves!"

"Are you an American?" Juan Flaco asked eagerly.

"Yep, name of Lewis Barton. This here is my ranch, and I wanta know what you're doing sneaking around my corral."

Juan Flaco told of the Los Angeles revolt, explaining that he was on his way to Monterey with an appeal for aid from Stockton.

"Well, in that case you're welcome to a horse. But you sure got a rough trip ahead of you. Them Mexicans'll be thicker'n fleas 'tween here and Monterey!"

It was eleven o'clock that night when Juan Flaco rode into the American camp at Santa Barbara. News of the Los Angeles revolt had spread, and the caballeros in Santa Barbara area had followed their Southern neighbor's example. The young American lieutenant who, with a handful of men, was trying to hold the town against repeated assaults by the Californians, gave Juan Flaco a fresh horse and he rode on.

Juan Flaco wasn't out of sight of the Santa Barbara Mission when he was sighted by a company of California lancers—and the chase was on!

Juan Flaco, realizing that his horse couldn't compare with the superb mounts of the Californians, left the road and took to the hills, urging his horse on with spurs and riata.

Crouched low over the horse's head to avoid the low-hanging limbs of the scrub oak trees dotting the hills, Juan Flaco urged his horse down an almost vertical hill, the lancers barely twenty yards behind him.

Too late he saw the fifteen foot ravine at the bottom of the hill. He jammed his spurs into the horse's sides. The animal leaped!

For a second or two, it looked as if the horse would topple back into the ravine, but with one supreme effort it scrambled up the opposite side. Juan Flaco reined to the right, heading for the mouth of a small canyon. He had no sooner reached the canyon when the gallant animal staggered and dropped dead—killed by the strain of the chase.

But once more, the California night was kind to Juan Flaco and the lancers galloped by searching vainly for him.

He sighed and started off on foot again.

The morning sun shone down on a bedraggled figure trudging wearily along—a few feet off the highway for safety's sake. His clothes were torn and his body badly scratched from the brush into which he ducked every time he heard a horse on the road. His boots, in none too good condition at the start of his ride, had been cut to ribbons by the sharp rocks, and his feet left bloodstains along the road.

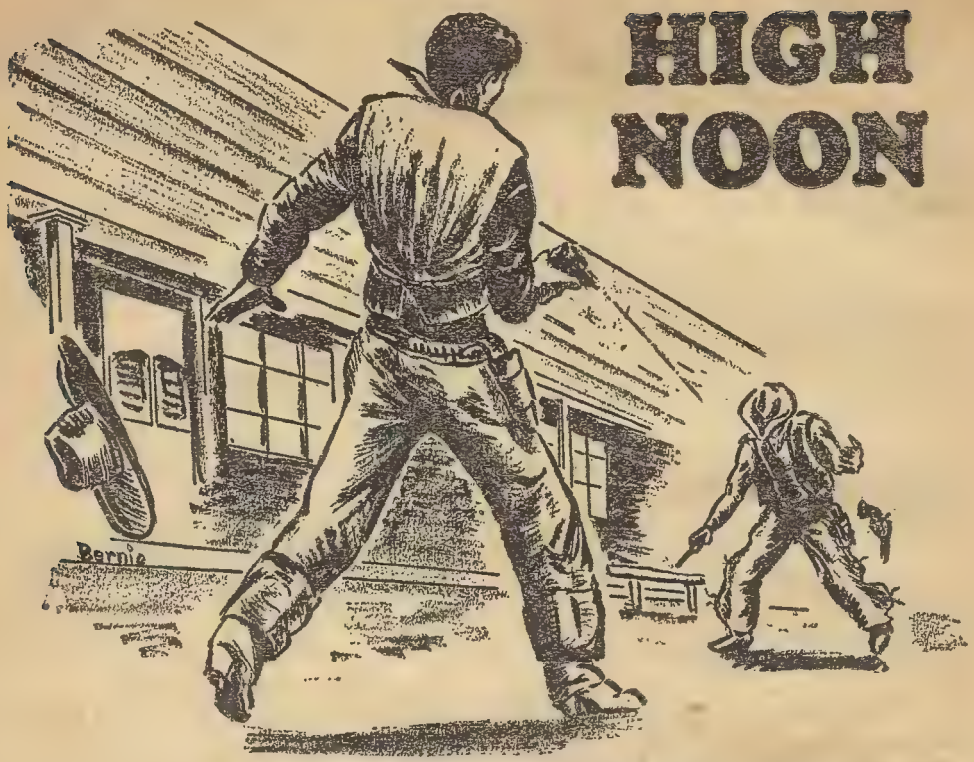
IT WAS nearly noon when Juan Flaco spotted the herd of half-wild horses feeding on the lower slopes of a nearby hill.

He didn't stop to think that most of those horses had never been ridden. All he knew was that he had to get to Monterey as soon as possible and that he could make much better time on a horse than on foot.

He watched the herd carefully as he crept closer. The wind was right, but he stopped every few feet so as not to scare the animals. Foot by foot he crept closer. Now he was thirty feet away. One of the horses snorted and sidled away. Juan Flaco stopped dead in his tricks, remaining motionless for several minutes. Finally the horse returned to its feeding. Juan Flaco picked out a little sorrel mare and edged closer. Now he was twenty-five feet away. Now twenty. He fingered his riata, then dropped his arm for the throw. At the same moment, Juan Flaco's arm shot forward. The

(Continued On Page 112)

The gun in his right hand belched flame . . .



HIGH NOON

By Chuck Martin

Jimmy Shando would be twenty-four come high noon and by that time he would have four killings on his hands . . .

THE grapevine began to work when Jimmy Shando passed the first saloon at the far end of Landusky's main street. Word of his coming preceded him as he rode along the narrow street, and the dust-covered cowboy knew that trouble was waiting for him. That trouble was a man named Sontag.

Swifty Sontag was a fast gunhawk with an uncontrollable temper. He was a big wide-shouldered man with sweeping mustaches and a brace of notched six-shooters in the worn holsters on his crossed gunbelts.

Sontag stepped into the street from the high boardwalk just as Jimmy Shando dismounted from his sweat drenched horse. The horse was between the two men who slapped for their six-shooters at the same time.

Jimmy Shando leaped clear to spare the animal lead intended for himself. The gun in his right hand belched flame and smoke to echo the stuttering roll from Sontag's brace of .45 Colts.

Swifty Sontag gave back a step and swung to the left just as the Stetson jumped from Jimmy Shando's black curly head. Sontag dropped his left-hand gun. He swayed unsteadily, opened the fingers of his right hand to lose his meat gun, and pitched headlong to the thick dust when his knees unhinged.

Swifty Sontag was dead!

Shando turned slowly as the click of metal told him another gun was cocked and ready to take up where Swifty Santag had left off. A stern-faced man of fifty-odd was glaring

at him, gun in hand, with a ball-pointed star pinned to his faded vest. Sheriff Ranse Cotter was the law in Landusky.

"How old are you, Jimmy Shando?" the sheriff demanded brusquely, a deep sullen anger glowing in his grey eyes.

"I'll be twenty-four come noon," Shando answered, taken by surprise. "Why?"

"It's nine o'clock straight up right now," the sheriff said coldly. "The country line is ten miles to the South, and you've got three hours to get out of my County a free man. If you are hereabouts when you are twenty-four, I'm wrapping the jug around you!"

"I shot in self defense," Shando had his say. "Sontag was laying for me, and he cleared leather first!"

"He sent you word that he would shoot on sight if you rode into Landusky," the sheriff said through tight lips. "You didn't have to come!"

"I had to come," Jimmy Shando contridicted, but his voice was low, and heavy with regret. "I had to get my mail."

"You don't live in Landusky County," Ranse Cotter said grimly. "I'll send your mail over to Red Horse in Jimpson County, and you can pick it up there. Sontag makes two men you've killed in two weeks, and it's got to stop. Top your cayuse and ride going away. The law is speaking, and taking no slack jaw!"

Jimmy Shando holstered his smoke-grimmed gun, stared at the doorway to the Post Office, and mounted his horse with a sigh. He had known Sheriff Cotter all his life, and Cotter always meant what he said.

Sheriff Cotter turned on his heel, and his gun also turned to cover two rough-looking men who quickly dropped their hands away from the half-drawn six-shooters in their holsters. The sheriff's action probably saved the life of Jimmy Shando who was riding out of town without a backward glance.

"You heard me say I was the law here in Landusky, Shep Talone," Cotter addressed one of the pair. "I know Swifty Sontag was a pard of yours and you didn't have what it takes to draw your shooting iron while Jimmy Shando was watching you and Prime Lee."

"He killed Sontag, and he killed Idaho Kurtz," Shep Talone answered viciously. "Jimmy Shando is a born killer, and too fast with a six-shooter to be alive!"

"Jimmy Shando owns the Triangle S, and you sheep walkers keep your woolies off his range," the sheriff said pointedly. "If he turns up with a slug in his back, I'll know where to find his killer."

"He *did* own the Triangle S," Shep Talone gloated. "Come high noon, me and Prime Lee will have something to say!"

The two sheepmen turned away and walked into the Eagle Saloon. The sheriff watched them go with a puzzled expression on his weathered face, after which he went to the Post Office and handed in a change of address for Jimmy Shando.

"Send his mail over to Red Horse," Cotter told the clerk. "Every time he rides into Landusky, there's a killing."

"We've got a registered package for him," he clerk said with a frown. "It's from a bank down in Texas, and that Red Horse stage has been held up three times in the last two weeks. Just as you say, sheriff."

Jimmy Shando rode his fast-stepping bay along the Snake River trail which separated his Triangle S range from Shep Talone's sheep-land. The Triangle S wasn't much of an outfit since the death of his father, Cal Shando.

Ten sections of good grazing land with plenty of water the year round, and perhaps five hundred head of beef critters. A comfortable three-room house, the only home Jimmy Shando had ever known.

"The old homestead," he laughingly called the Triangle S, which like many homesteads, had a five thousand dollar mortgage hanging over it by a thin thread of time.

Jimmy Shando was old for his years, like many another rough-country cowboy. His crew consisted of a rheumatic old cow-hand who stayed on because he needed a home, but

Misery Fenton was a tophand cow-camp cook.

Misery Fenton limped out of the barn as Jimmy Shando rode into the Triangle S ranchyard. The old cooky was leading a tall black horse, and he yelled at his young boss in a wind-roughened voice.

"Strip your gear and bolt your hull on the black, Jimmy. Prime Lee rode by the river ford not long ago, and his horse was about done with the staggers. I seen him rope out the mate to that bay yo're straddling down in the river pasture, and then he hit out for the stage road!"

Jimmy Shando was out of the saddle like a relay rider. Prime Lee was six feet tall, just Jimmy's size. The stage had been held up twice, and it was carrying salvation for Jimmy Shando and the Triangle S.

Jimmy didn't know why the blood was singing through his veins as he pulled his latigo and changed saddle to the tall black. He put it down to long practise when he drew his smoke-grimmed gun, ejected the spent shell, and thumbed a cartridge through the loading gate of his .45 Peacemaker Colt.

"Keep back in the tules down there by the crossing, Jimmy," old Misery warned, and Shando nodded as he raced out of the yard.

Jimmy Shando tried to piece the puzzle together as he rode toward the river. He had seen Prime Lee and Shep Talone in Landusky, watching him with hands on their holstered guns. He and his father had always had trouble with the sheepmen until old Cal Shando had built a high wire fence along the Triangle S side of Snake River.

That had been three years ago, just before Jimmy's twenty-first day. Old Cal had borrowed money to pay for the hog-proof wire, and the mortgage was due and payable on or before his twenty-fourth birthday... at high noon.

Jimmy Shando frowned as his right hand fingered his gun. Old Cal had been shot in the back while riding fence had been dead several hours when Misery Fenton had found him by back-tracking the dead man's riderless horse.

Idaho Kurtz and Shep Talone were sheepmen, but Prime Lee and Swifty Sontag were hired gun-fighters. Now Kurtz and Sontag were dead, but one of the four had killed Cal Shando.

"I'll get that hoss thief," Jimmy vowed under his breath. "Sheriff or not, I'll take Prime Lee back to Landusky!"

HIGH TULES fringed the banks of Snake River where the stage road made a crossing at the ford. A glance at the heavy silver watch taken from his overalls pocket showed the time to be ten minutes past ten.

Jimmy Shando rode into the tules and dismounted just as the creak of wheels announced the coming of the Landusky stage, and he crept forward under cover. A horse had crossed the ford recently, the muddy waterstill swirling in the deep hoof-prints on the opposite bank.

Old Whip Crockett usually stopped his four-hitch for a blow after crossing the Snake, and Shando strained his eyes when the wheels stopped creaking up around the bend.

Jimmy Shando left his horse and sped the hundred yards up the slight grade on the balls of his feet. He ducked into the brush when he heard the old driver crack his whip and yell for his team to step lively.

The stage coach whirled past Shando's hiding place in a flurry of red dust. Then Jimmy was speeding up the rutted road to the place where the stage had stopped.

His high heels braked to a sliding stop when he saw a tall man in the road, dumping the contents of a slitted mail-sack on the ground. Except for the mask which covered his eyes, the bandit could have passed for Jimmy Shando.

The hold-up man heard Jimmy's sliding heels and slapped for the gun on his right thigh. Just as the heavy six-shooter was clearing for leather, Jimmy Shando made his pass.

Two guns leaped into sight with orange flame tipping the muzzle. Two stuttering reports blended, but the stutter meant that one of the gun-fighters had shot second.

Jimmy Shando leaned against the recoil and reared back the hammer

for a follow-up. The Road Agent coughed, and his falling body pitched a long shadow out ahead of him. It stopped at Jimmy Shando's scuffed boots, and the cowboy walked slowly

"It's Prime Lee," Shando muttered, as he peared under the black silk mask. "He robbed the United States Mail, and I've got to pack him to Landusky to prove my innocence."

A flat package had fallen to the ground near Lee's lifeless body. Shando picked it up and his eyes widened. It was addressed to himself, and the heavy wrapper at one end had been broken. Paper money was visible through the torn wrapper.

"I needed that money," Shando murmured, and pushed the package into the left hip pocket of his overalls. "I'll have to work fast to beat the deadline."

Sheriff Ranse Cotter rubbed his grizzled chin thoughtfully as he walked into Drovers Bank. Sam Burnett owned the bank, and he glanced up as the sheriff entered his private office.

"I heard about that killing, Ranse," the banker said, and shook his head. "You've got to do something about young Jimmy Shando."

"He shot in self defense," the sheriff answered gruffly. "I saw the whole affair, and Swifty Sontag drew on Jimmy first. How much time had Jimmy got on that mortgage you hold against the Triangle S?"

"Not that it's any of your business, Ranse, but his time is up at high noon," the banker answered with a twisted smile. "Shando hasn't made any money to speak of, and I've got a customer who wants to buy the Triangle S."

"Wait a minute!" the sheriff barked. "Would this customer be Shep Talone, by any chance?"

"Now that you mention it, Talone is the man," Burnett answered acidly. "I lost ten thousand dollars in those two stage hold-ups, and I've got to raise some quick money."

Ranse Cotter remained silent, shaking his head. Jimmy Shando had said that urgent business had brought him to Landusky; had mentioned that it was important for him to get his mail.

"Mebbe Jimmy borrowed that money he owed you, Burnett," the sheriff said to the banker. "He was anxious to get inside the Post Office, but I had his mail sent over to Red Horse."

"In which case he can't make it back here by noon," the banker answered with a satisfied smile. "I can make a thousand by selling to Shep Talone."

"You can't do that to a cattleman," the sheriff argued angrily. "There was a registered package for Jimmy, and it might have been the money to save the spread. You've got to give him an extension of time!"

"I'll give him until high noon; not a minute more!" the banker snapped. "I've got to make back some of my losses."

The sheriff stared suspiciously when the banker began to smile. Burnett rubbed his hands together as he nodded his bald head.

"I've got it," he announced triumphantly. "If Jimmy Shando had money coming on the stage, it was him who robbed the stage those other times. All he'd have to do would be send the money away to some other place, and then have it sent back to him. He's trying to pay the mortgage he owes me with my own money!"

Sheriff Cotter frowned and left the bank office,. He had known Cal Shando for thirty years; had known Jimmy since his birth. A hard-working cowboy who knew his trade, and was trying to build up his herd.

The sheriff glanced up as he brushed against a man just entering the bank. Shep Talone grinned and went on into Banker Burnett's office. Ranse Cotter glared at the sheepman and wrinkled his nose with disgust. The odor of sheep-dip followed Talone where ever he went, and the sheriff didn't like sheep.

"Looks bad for Jimmy Shando, any way you figger it," the sheriff muttered. "If he comes to Landusky, I'll have to do my duty."

JIMMY Shando found the bay horse Prime Lee had roped in the Triangle S river pasture. He used his brush jumper to blindfold the horse, lifted the dead man and laid

him across the saddle face down. After tying ankles and wrists together, Shando fastened the lead-rope to his own saddle.

Shando mounted the tall black and jerked the jumper-blind from the bay horse. In spite of the sheriff's warning, Jimmy Shando was riding to Landusky with a present for Ranse Cotter. And to do some business of his own, he told himself grimly.

Once again the underground telegraph began to spread the news as Shando rode into the dusty main street with his gruesome burden. Hard-faced men looked at him and glanced hastily away, but a crowd had gathered in front of the sheriff's office.

Jimmy Shando drew rein in front of the jail and swung to he ground. Ranse Cotter was outside watching him with cold hostile eyes. Jimmy jerked a thumb at the corpse across te saddle of his bay horse.

"Brought in a hoss thief, sher'ff," he said to Cotter. "You can see my Triangle S burned on that bay's left shoulder, and I caught this jaser robbing the stage. Yonder's the mail pouch hanging on the bay's saddle horn."

"You got any proof?" the sheriff asked, his voice stern with authority.

"Old Misery Fenton saw Lee rope out that bay horse of mine," Shando answered without hesitation. "Whip Crockett can identify the robber easy enough. What time is it?"

The sheriff glanced at his watch with a suspicious gleam in his gray eyes. As though he knew what was coming, and didn't like any part of it.

"Fifteen minutes to twelve," he answered. "Yonder comes Banker Burnet."

As the banker walked close to stare at the dead man, Jimmy Shando pulled the flat package from his hip pocket. Burnett stared at the registered package and nudged the sheriff." Shando spoke to Ranse Cotter in an earnest voice. "Take enough money out of the package to pay Burnett, and hold the rest for me."

"Just a minute," the sheriff said, but he took the package of money. "How much is in this bundle?"

"Ten thousand dollars," Shando answered without hesitation. "Sent to me from the Cattleman's bank in Dallas, Texas."

"Remember what I told you, Ranse," the banker warned the sheriff. "I lost ten thousand dollars, and this killer can't pay me with my own money!"

Jimmy Shando faced about like a cornered wolf. His lips snarled back to show tightly clenched teeth.

"Explain that remark, banker!" he ripped out at Burnett. "About me paying off my mortgage with *your* money!"

"The stage was robbed twice, and I lost ten thousand in currency," the banker answered with quiet grimness. "You sent that money back to Texas, and some pard of yours sent it back to you. The sheriff ordered you out of town, and sent that money over to Red Horse on the stage. You rob the stage, take the money, and kill Prime Lee to make him look guilty!"

Jimmy Shando stared at the banker with his hand above his smoke-grimed gun. Only the sheriff's low voice prevented the Triangle S cowboy from losing his head.

"Don't draw, Jimmy. I've got you covered, and you're under arrest!"

Jimmy Shando turned his head, saw the cocked gun in the sheriff's right hand and dropped his wide shoulders.

"Looks like a stacked deck," he murmured wearily. "All I'm asking for is an extension of time until I can prove my innocence."

"Every man is innocent until proven guilty," the sheriff said gruffly. "Step aside and pass your word not to try to escape."

"I promise, Ranse," Jimmy Shando said in a husky voice,

"You men scatter about your business," the sheriff ordered the crowd. "I heard that talk about a hang-rope, and I'm letting Jimmy Shando keep his gun. On your way!"

Jimmy Shando walked into the jail office and leaned against the back wall. Galloping horses were coming into town, and the careening stage coach came to a stop with grinding brakes in front of the jail.

Whip Crockett wrapped his leather ribbons around the brake bar and jumped to the ground. He leaped inside and pointed an accusing finger at Shando.

"Arrest that man for robbing the stage, sher'ff," the old Jehu shouted. "He held me up just north of the Snake River ford!"

Misery Fenton leaped over the sill and grabbed the stage driver by the shoulder.

"Yo're a contaminated old liar!" Fenton yelled. "I saw Prime Lee rope out one of our Triangle S hosses."

"The gent who robbed me was straddling a Triangle S bay," Crockett argued. "He was wearing a black mask, and he took the mail pouch. Put a mask on Jimmy Shando, and you've got the hold-up!"

"Take 'er back or I'll do you a meanness," Misery warned Whip Crockett. "Jimmy had ten thousand of his own money on your stage, and now he's lost it!"

"He didn't lose it," the sheriff interrupted. "Jimmy rode in here with that packet of money in his pocket, and tried to pay off his mortgage."

"What d'yuh know?" Whip Crockett whispered. "He robs the United States mail to steal from himself!"

"He had to pay off the bank by high noon," Misery argued stubbornly. 'It would have been too late if Jimmy had gone to Red Horse for his money, and then ride all the way back here to Landusky!"

Jimmy Shando opened his mouth as he stared at Misery Fenton. Even the old cooky was sure of Shando's guilt, and the clock on the wall gave the time as two minutes to twelve.

"I'll sign the charge again him, sher'ff," Whip Crockett told Cotter, and coiling his whip, he walked outside. A moment later his high-pitched voice screamed from the street.

"Come a-running, sher'ff. Right here's the hombre who stuck me up, and yonder's the bay hoss he was straddling!"

Sheriff Cotter hurried outside followed by Misery Fenton. Whip Crockett was pointing at the body of Prime Lee, and the black mask which had not been removed.

"That's the gent, sher'ff," Crockett declared positively. "And he held me up once before while his pard took the mail pouch!"

"He does look like Jimmy Shando," Ranse Cotter muttered to himself, and tugged at his short gray mustache. Then he frowned as he stared at the packet of money in his left hand. "This money was on the stage, and Jimmy had it in his pocket when he rode in here with the corpse," he muttered.

A hand tugged at his shoulder from behind, and the sheriff turned to face Jimmy Shando.

"It's nearly high noon, Ranse," the cowboy pleaded. "I give you my word not to escape. Just go over to the bank and leave the money as security until this thing is ironed out. Otherwise I'll lose my whole outfit!"

"By dogies, I'll do it," the sheriff answered with a thrust of his stubborn chin. "I'll leave you here on your spoken word!"

Turning abruptly on his heel, Ranse Cotter strode across the street and entered the front door of the bank. He didn't see a tall lanky man leave the bank by the side door. Misery Fenton spoke softly to his young boss from the side of his mouth.

"Watch yourself, Jimmy. Yonder comes that sheep-walker, Shep Talone!"

Shep Talone came across the street, walking stiff-legged like a dog on the fight, and dragging his Mexican spurs. He stopped just below the boardwalk, stared at the body of Prime Lee, and raised his eyes to the face of Jimmy Shando.

"So you killed Prime Lee on a sneak, and then robbed the stage?" he accused, and his nasal voice twanged like a brass gong. "I taken up for Prime, you dry-gulching killer!"

"Circle off, Talone!" Jimmy Shando warned. "I'm under arrest, but I'll protect myself!"

Shep Talone grinned like a wolf and went into a crouch. The same kind of a crouch Swifty Sontag had used that very morning when Jimmy Shando had ridden into Landusky on important business.

Shando read the signs and set himself to meet the challenge. All four of the Talone gang had brought him

showdown; had left him no alternative.

Shep Talone rapped down for his gun without further warning. The long barrel scrap against oiled leather before Jimmy Shando made his bid.

The lightning struck as Shando's brown hand dipped down and up with a muzzle-bloom on the end of his leaping six-shooter. Black powder-smoke gusted to snuff out the flame, and Shando leaned against his bucking gun to ear back the hammer for a follow-up.

Shep Talone jerked back and triggered a shot off-side into the dusty street. The sheepman spun around, buckled at the knees, and thudded down to measure his gangling length. A cloud of dust plumed up. When it had settled, Shep Talone's rusty boots had stopped thumping a loser's requiem.

Sheriff Ranse Cotter came running from the bank, followed by Banker Burnett. A little man also came running from the Post Office, waving a paper in his hand.

Ranse Cotter covered Jimmy Shando with his law gun and told Jimmy to drop his hardware.

"You've lost your Triangle S spread, Shando," the sheriff said sternly. "And you've killed yourself another man!"

"He had it to do!" Misery Fenton shouted. "Shep Talone came out the side door of the bank as you went in the front. He brought fight to Jimmy, and he drew first. You can ask Whip Crockett!"

"That's right, sher'ff," the old stage driver said laconically. "And put a mask on that sheep herder, I'd swear he was one of the bandits that stuck me up last week."

"Arrest Shando for murder," Banker Burnett bleated. "He didn't pay off his mortgage on time, and I sold the Triangle S to Talone. I'll hold the property for Talone's heirs and assigns."

The little Postmaster edged through the crowd and faced Burnett.

"Have you any of the money Talone paid you?" he demanded.

"None of your business," the banker blustered.

"You've got that money in your wallet, Burnett," the sheriff interrupted sternly. "Let the Postmaster have a look at it. I think I catch his drift."

The Postmaster took the money Burnett handed to him, consulted the paper in his hand, and glared at the banker.

"We need another bank here in Landusky," he said scathingly. "I had the numbers of the bills which were sent to you by the bank at Butte. The numbers correspond to those on this money Shep Talone paid you for the Triangle S. He paid you with your own money, proving that he robbed the stage those other two times!"

"Just write Jimmy Shando out a receipt for five thousand dollars," the sheriff told Banker Burnett. "I offered it to you before high noon, and you refused to take it. I don't know where Jimmy got his money, and it's none of my business!"

"It's honest money," Jimmy Shando said in a low voice. "My grandfather on my mother's side left it to me. It was held in trust by the bank down in Dallas, and they sent it by registered mail. You see, I wasn't to get it until I was twenty-four. Thanks, sher'ff, and you, Postmaster Brown. I was twenty-four today at ....high noon!"

THE END

Six-Shooter Initiation

By Mark Lish

When a nervy plan seems to work too easy — beware!

I DIDN'T like it.

I was just a green, gun-handy kid and Rand Fletcher was an experienced border man, my boss-to be if I got the job I was after. I still didn't like it. Rand was a *man,* honest and clean and afraid of nothing on earth, ready to go the limit anytime he thought he was right. But those very qualities made him slow sometimes to suspect the other fellow.

Me, I must have been born with a lot of crook in me; I suspect easy. Man feeding me a load, I pay more attention to the way he tells it than to what he says. And this Sheriff Tinsley had a hearty chuckle and a just-right handshake and a lot of convincing words; but somehow his delivery didn't fit into my ears quite right. I laid off lighting cigarets and kept my face out of the flare from theirs; I didn't want Tinsley to get too well acquainted. Just a hunch, sure, but a lot of big pots have been won on hunches.

"I think you've got a good scheme, with the kid there a plumb stranger around here," he was telling Rand, with a little too much unction. "Should have let me know earlier, though.

"Oh, sure, I know its got to be a dead secret, or it's the kid's neck," the sheriff went on. Main thing is not to let it get noised around town. If dope-smugglers are using this county, through them brushy hills along the border, they're bound to have a stakeout here soaking up news. Reckon that's why you fetched me put to this old shed in the dark, rather'n let the kid show in town..If he learns anything, how's he to turn it in?"

"At this same old shed," Rand told him. "I noticed the other day there's a long ladder lying along that back wall. If the kid wants to report, he slides in here in the dark and stands that ladder up on the town side, just at daylight. I'll be watching and come talk. Then he can slide back into that fringe of timber without being seen from town even if anybody is up that early."

Tinsley chuckled, and I heard the little *spat* as he slapped Rand on the back. He turned to me then. "There's a split peak twenty miles or so southeast," he told me. "South of that is the brush country. Your play's to camp around in there, quiet, letting a little smoke show now and then. They'll be on the watch and spot you, maybe come talk, sizing you up. That'll be your chance to talk your way in. Good Luck, Kid."

He slapped me on the back and Rand laid a hand on my shoulder and wished me luck and admitted I'd need it; I got on my horse and rode into the dark fringe of timber.... The horse was my own and a good, surefooted traveler. When I halted some hours later I figured I must be not far from the split peak. While I was tying the horse in the brush he lifted his head to whinny. I grabbed his ear in time, and caught faint sounds of hoofs passing a few hundred feet away. Likely a stray, of course, but I held my own horse quiet till I couldn't hear anything more. I rolled in my blanket then for forty winks. It was still dark when a sudden whinny jerked me awake.

AS I SAT up an answering whinny was shut off quick, as by a yanked bit, and trotting hoofs

drummed along some rocky trail not far away. Toward town. I lay awake after that, thinking or trying to think. And the more I thought, the stronger my hunch grew that the rider had been a messenger, on his way back to town after carrying the news someplace. About *me*. With a little more experience and sense, maybe I'd backed out right then. But I was more scared of looking silly, if the rider turned out to be just a stray cowboy out late, rather than of any hunch. This was my first assignment, sort of my initiation, and I felt I couldn't afford to fall down on it for *any* reason. Just the same, it was about then my backhair began turning up the wrong way.

I was stiff with morning chill when I rolled my blanket, got on the horse and rode a few miles farther, to south of the split peak that loomed tall and close in the grey haze of coming dawn. I found a spring, picketed the horse on grass and built a fire. Not a smoky fire, but not a plumb dry one either. I could see a thin spiral rising above the brush and trees as the sun came up. I took my time cooking breakfast, adding to the fire for warmth while I ate.

I was still eating when a wolfish gent rode out of the brush and sat looking down at me from his saddle. He wore two sixshooters and a mean look, and he didn't answer my grin nor my invitation to 'light and help eat. Instead he kept one hand close to its sixshooter and grumbled at me that camp was a mile farther and the boss wanted to see me.

They'd sent the meanest-looking one to fetch me, but that wasn't bragging much on the three left in camp. My hunch about the messenger strengthened; nothing human could look hard as that without special occasion. But I managed a grin at the boss when he named himself—Rick Turner—and started right in on my play.

"Look, Turner," I began, trying to look as tough as they did and at the same time sound straightforward and truthful; "I'm a stranger down this way, but I figure you must be the boys I heard about back a ways. Eh?"

Nobody said anything and nobody grinned back at me. My mean-looking guide tested one of his guns in its holster, sort of fondling its handle. Two of the others edged a little further in their flanking positions, so nearly behind me I had to move my head to keep track of first one then the other. My own gun seemed a mile down from my shoulder, my arm too short to reach it. I tried using willpower on my backhair to make it lie down. It didn't work.

I took a long slow breath and let my tongue rattle: "Needn't be leery of *me*, boys. I'm on the dodge, from up North, and looking for a hookup with some good outfit. Maybe you heard of the Laramie Kid? Well, that's me. I'm supposed to be kind of handy to have around, wherever guns is being used."

That didn't go over so good either. My two flankers still watched Turner for a signal. My ex-guide just watched *me*, kind of like a cat watches a mouse that thinks it's getting free. I felt about the way I had the morning I woke to find afoot of sleeping rattler sticking from between my blankets, its head just under my armpit.

I FISHED out the clippings Rand and I had cut from Northern papers, dealing with the Laramie Kid and his salty doings up in Wyoming, leaned to hand them to Turner. He reached with his left hand, gingerly, looked them over with about as much interest as a kid reading geography the last day of school. There was one picture of the Kid that looked a lot like me, but even that didn't seem to impress him.

I was about ready to melt and drip down the saddle, by now. Not a bold bad law man any longer; just a green, scared kid with four hard cases eager to see who could shoot the biggest hole in me. I fished desperately in what I use for a mind and came up with:

"Fact is, I got special news for you boys. The sheriff in that last town thinks he's some punkins as a detective. Tackled me to act as stool-pigeon for him."

I threw back my head and laughed good and loud. Turner joined me to the extent of a sour grin. The others couldn't see any joke. But at least they were still listening, and they'd filled out my hunch that Tinsley was their stakeout. I unstuck my tongue again and sailed right on:

"Ran into another gent first. Smart Aleck named of Rand Fletcher. Some kind of Federal law dog. I pulled the wool over his eyes and he took me to Tinsley. Whee-ew!—do those two think they're Sherlock Holmes." I went on from there with a few details, leaving out special stuff like the ladder signal, that they might make use of.

That seemed to help. I decided I must have kept my voice steadier than I'd thought. The tension went out of them; not all at once but little by little as if they hated letting go of this good excuse to kill somebody. My ex-guide, non-philosopher and un-friend let go the handle of his gun disgustedly and began rolling a cigaret. I got out my pack of store-made ones and offered it. He took one grudgingly and lit it and complained it wasn't the brand he liked.

Turner made a motion with one raised hand, and a fifth man came out of the brush, letting down the hammer on his rifle. Their holecard in case I'd turned out tough to handle or had a pal of my own stashed in the brush. My backhair took one final scratch at my hat and subsided. I was in—on probation anyway—or Turner would have left him out there awhile longer.

Once he decided to be friendly, Turner went as far as his nature would let him. Taffying me up, talking all around the idea I could see squirming back of his eyes. Rand Fletcher had got to be a thorn in Turner's side, and the sore was beginning to fester.

"We get rid of that gent, the next one be a while learning how to get so nasty," he told me, lolling around camp while the others took turns as lookouts. "We got a good thing here, our pay waitin' reglar as we kin make a trip. But the higherups—the gents we deliver to and git our pay from—is gittin' worried. Twice now this Fletcher had laid traps and dang near nailed us. The higherups is scared they'll lose a shipment.

"Got any ideas?"

Naturally I had ideas—all but the one he was fishing for. I kept him talking awhile, mostly by shying just clear of the subject of me shooting Rand Fletcher for him. But he was wary, not giving any real information, and I knew my value as a spy was gone. Tinsley's message had spoiled that, even if I'd temporarily spiked it. Best I could do now was try and get out with a whole skin, and I needed some sort of break to do even that. But it was important, because besides my own skin, there was Rand needing to be warned in time about Tinsley.

OUR TALK drifted around, until pretty soon Turner brought up the matter of Fletcher being in that town right now, and how he wished he could just move in with his bunch, locate Rand and go to shooting. I grabbed at that and asked why not.

"'Cause that's a fightin' town, brother," he told me ruefully, "and four of us has got scars to prove it. Y'see me and Bush, that guided you in this morning, and Doc Payne and Jerky—him with the rifle—stuck up their bank about a year ago. That was 'fore we got into this present hookup, when we was gatherin' ourn the hard way.

"Well, somebody caught on and hollered siccem, and the populace come out of it with a bang. Reglar old street fight like Coffeyville, with us on the run but shootin' back, and half the citizens gettin' a good look and a shot or two at us. We got off with the cash, though—and it busted their bank, which spells our names m-u-d around there. 'Most every citizen has got a description of us four in each eye and a warrant in his holster—or handyby if he favors a rifle. Me and Bush and Doc, we tried ridin' in awhile back, hopin' they'd fergot. Mebby you noticed the new holes in Bush's hat, and the bandage under Doc's shirt."

That was the best news I'd had since Rand told me maybe I'd do for the border. If I could get this bunch close to town and somehow attract attention, I'd have 'em on the short end. But Turner was tired of talking; he eyed me hard and threw it straight at me:

"What's the matter with *you* handlin' Fletcher? You could let on you was still with him, and—"

"I got a better notion," I cut in hastily. I wasn't interested now in just getting clear myself; I wanted Turner and his bunch close to town. "I'm supposed to hit that shed in the dark, like I told you, and keep out of sight till he shows up to talk. Well—how's he to know how many's waiting in there?"

That did it. Once he'd thought it over and decided it was his own idea all the time, Turner could hardly wait till dark. He went right to working out details, and I soon saw why he was leader. I'd be a few feet inside the door when Rand came, so his attention would be on me. To save rousing the town with shots, Doc Payne would be at one side the doorway ready to put on his favorite act —sliding his knife upward under the ribs into the heart. Turner himself would be in the fringe of timber upslope from the shed, just in case. And so on.

When he had everything set and timed, Turner dug up a bottle and we did some advance celebrating. One quart, six thirsts; he didn't fall for my hints about another bottle or two or three.

"We git that so-and-so outen the way," he bragged, "we got a cinch. First thing we do is—" he hesitated there and shot a glance at Krieg, the fifth man of the bunch. I'd already noticed Krieg seemed to be a sort of outsider; I knew now he was the "higherup's" man, planted to keep a check on Turner's doings. This time Turner hesitated only an instant and went on, his coarse voice defiant: "First thing we do is jack up our price. Dang it, takes brush-hands like us to git the stuff outen Old Mex, but so far we been gittin' only the drip...."

WE HIT the old shed an hour before dawn. Jerky stayed in the timber upslope. Turner stationed Krieg in a thicket of brush opposite the shed door, with open ground all around it. As an extra holecard like Jerky, Turner explained carefully. But I saw Kreig hesitate and go a little white, and knew he understood what I did: that if there was shooting and the town roused, he was to be seen leaving and carry the blame for killing Rand Fletcher. The rest of us could duck out, keeping the shed between us and town, and reach the timber unseen.

....That is, the rest of *them*. Five minutes after we reached the shed I knew Turner meant to leave me there alongside Rand. Because Turner went straight to the old ladder and leaned it up on the side toward town. I'd kept still about that ladder signal, letting them think Rand was supposed just to come out here *every* morning. But Tinsley's messenger had told of that too, and I hadn't been fooling Turner anywhere along the line—he'd fooled me instead, leading me on.

The ladder meant something else too: it meant I couldn't make my break until daylight when Rand showed up. Because if I tried sooner and they downed me, Rand would have no warning and would walk right into them.

The shed was a shell, with no boarded stalls or anything else big enough for a man to hide behind. Turner pointed out how everything had to break at the instant Rand Fletcher filled the door, before he got a look along the wall. Doc Payne went to his post by the door and hunkered down squaw style, caressing his razor-sharp long blade like Boy holding Girl's hand, making a few practice thrusts upward imaginary unsuspecting ribs.

Bush was to freelance it, filling in where and if needed, with no particular stance. But as the first gray light seeped in around us I noticed him glance at me and lick his lips in that gloating way he had, and I knew Bush had special private orders from Turner. About *me*.

I spotted a wide loose board that I could hit with my shoulder and go through, the instant Rand showed this side of town, and while their attention was on him coming. Once clear of the shed I'd be hard to catch with a bullet, because I didn't mean just to run—I meant to *fly*. That would warn Rand, and between us we'd keep Turner & Co. busy till the town roused....

Yep, I had it planned all careful and almost safe. So when Rand Fletcher came walking down the road out of the last fringe of town, I dumped said plans and got ready to commit suicide.

For someone was walking with him, and as they came closer I recognized Sheriff Tinsley by his bright and shining star. And when I saw how he walked half-a-step to Rand's rear, and turned his head now and then to make certain no one watched from behind them in town, and slid his holster farther back around his hip so the gun would come out in line with Rand's kidneys, I knew what Friend Sheriff was up to next.

TINSLEY COULDN'T know what had happened at the camp after his messenger had left. He'd seen the ladder signal, supposed the gang had someway slipped up and I was on deck with information that had to be headed off. So....Rand Fletcher shot in the back at the door of this old shed, and a certain gunhandy kid with Wyoming clippings in his pocket shot in front—by Tinsley avenging Rand's death—what could be nicer? I heard Rick Turner chuckle at his knothole ten feet from mine, and I knew the same thoughts were in Turner's mind.

If I made my dash through the shed wall now, Tinsley would simply backshot Rand Fletcher without waiting to reach the shed. I spent the next sixty seconds trying to stop shivering, but at the same time planning and timing every move I knew I had to make.

Then Rand with Tinsley half-behind him was swinging wide around the shed's corner. I was in the place Turner had appointed to me, a few feet inside the doorway. When the two saw me and Tinsley's shoulder started lifting, I drew and fired; and in the same motion kicked my own feet from under me and went rolling onto my back.

My bullet took Tinsley in the left upper chest and whirled him away from Rand, so that the gun he'd pulled sent its bullet through thin boards into the back of Doc Payne, hunkered beside the door. Doc hardly moved, just stiffened and twisted his face against the pain and died. Not that I paid direct attention to him then—all hell broke loose with those two shots and I had no time for dead or dying men who couldn't shoot at me.

My trick fall dropped me under Bush's bullet from the side; as I struck on my back I slanted a shot upward between my legs and Bush's gloating mouth took that one and Bush make a lurching dive squarely on top of me, blood gushing from his mouth all across my face and upper chest. I still dream about that. I rolled free of Bush and pawed at it, it slickened my palms so the gun slipped to the shed floor and for a terrible blind moment I couldn't find it.

By the time I did, and pawed the red film out of my eyes and could see, Rick Turner was face down half-through the door and Rand Fletcher was striding straight away, across open ground toward Krieg. Krieg must have got excited, for he had left the shelter of his thicket and was standing this side of it playing crosscatch with Rand. I saw Rand's jacket jerk twice as bullets tore through it, and saw Krieg's left arm go slack and lifeless. Then Rand's hat got a dimple in it on one side and I remembered Jerky and his rifle upslope in the timber.

It was too dangerous in that doorway anyhow, with Krieg's bullets coming around Rand and hunting for me, so I grabbed Rick Turner's Colt from his dead hand and hiked into the open and began dividing Jerky's attention with all the lead I could squeeze out of both guns. It was a

little far for short barrels but Jerky was in plain sight resting his rifle across a limb, and I got in a lucky one that knocked a hindleg from under him. He fell on the wrong side, but twisted like a snake and poked the rifle my way and began making me wish I was someplace under a bed.

THOROUGH cuss, Jerky. He cut my belt over my right hip and knocked off my hat and my left bootheel and then broke my right thigh. About then, both my shortguns ran dry and there I was—down, helpless, out of it. He steadied then and settled his elbow in the dirt for a solid rest, and I could see the rifle muzzle rising slowly, and his eye gleaming across the sights like a bright savage chip of metal. When the muzzle leveled on my chest, or maybe a little higher, at my head, I knew Jerky would pull the the trigger. And with that steady aim he wasn't going this time just to knock off a corner. He was going to center me, and the bullet was going to tear through where it counted.

Funny thing, it was right about then I discovered I wasn't scared anymore. For twenty-four hours I'd walked hand in hand with Fear, and now here I was facing the surest ticket yet, and the fear was gone. I didn't know it then, but I'd stumbled through my sixshooter initiation and fear from now on would be only caution. Sense. Whatever keeps you from settling your hand dried my mouth and cramped my stomach and iced my spine was gone for good. I sat there watching that rifle muzzle rise past my chin, and the eye behind it aiming, and Jerky's finger crooked around the trigger, and only wondered if I could time a duck with the tightening of that finger.

I did it too, and that bullet only grooved the thick meat of my shoulder and it was the last in his magazine. And while he clicked his hammer at me once more, in angry haste this time, Rand stepped over Krieg and got Krieg's rifle. And Jerky was on the short end now, sixshooter against rifle. He didn't last.

I knew what had ailed Jerky's shooting, trimming my edges the way he had, by now my own bullet-broken thighbone was treating me. But Rand came and grinned down at me and said he guessed my initiation was over and I was now a full member of the tribe, and pinned his own badge onto my shirt. After that I could pretend it was somebody else's leg while we bragged about what upright lives both of us must have lived. Rand had it on me there, at first,because he didn't even limp. All he had to show for maybe fifty seconds of deadly gunfire was five holes in his clothing, with scraped hide under two of them. But I evened that up by pointing out how he was too scrawny for anybody to hit with a bullet anyway.

At that it was a good thing he was on his feet when the town got out there, to keep 'em from stringing up Krieg who still hung onto life. Rand stood over him with the rifle until he got the crowd convinced Krieg was needed to talk. Krieg did talk, too; enough that inside ten days the whole ring, right to the top, was waiting trial.

THE END

What every bride *shouldn't* know:

WHAT it feels like to be poor . . .

What it feels like when your first-born needs an expensive doctor—and you can't afford it . . .

What it's like wanting a home of your own . . . and never quite getting it . . .

What it's like having your kids grow up not knowing whether they'll ever get to college . . .

What it's like to see the Joneses and the Does and the Smiths able to travel abroad—but never you . . .

What it's like to have to keep telling yourself, "He may not have money, but he's my Joe."

There is no cure-all for all these things.

But the closest thing to it for most of us is buying U.S. Savings Bonds—automatically. So here's a bit of friendly advice for newlyweds:

Get on the Payroll Savings Plan where you work or the Bond-a-Month Plan where you have a checking account.

Either plan helps you save money regularly, automatically, and *surely*, for the things you want.

It's one of the finest things you can do to start married life right.

Save the easy, automatic way...with U.S. Savings Bonds

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The Tishomingo Bird

Allan K. Echols

ALL WAS well with Merle Robertson; outside the howling wind whipped the night into a snowy lather of blinding fury. But here in his jail cell it was warm and snug.

Merle lay in his bunk, the heat from the pot bellied stove outside keeping him warm, reading a copy of Hunter, Trader And Trapper. It was warmer here than in the leanto shack back of Cooper's Second Hand Wagon and Implement Yard, which would have still been his home if his fight with Cooper hadn't ended his employment there and landed him in jail.

The front door of the jail opened to admit a small old man who was mostly white whiskers and coyote-skin cap sitting atop a moth-eaten fur coat made of home-tanned coonskins. Marshal Nesbit himself was represented in this bundle only by a small red nose, a pair of snapping gray eyes and a pair of china teeth.

"Merle," he snapped, "you fresh-air fiend, close that danged window before I come and nail it up."

Merle Robertson did not look up from his reading. "I can't reach it," he shouted.

"Stand up on your bunk, then."

"I still couldn't reach it."

"Why the tarnation not?"

"Because it ain't in my cell. It's in the next one."

Marshal Nesbit roared, "Hey, you hombres, close that window."

Only the echo of his own voice answered him, and he came stamping into the corridor before the two cells. He looked into the cell adjoining Merle's, and his eyes lit on the open window, whose bars had been forcibly pulled outward.

The marshal let out a yell.

"What the tarnation? Hey Merle, where's them jiggers? Where's my deputy that's supposed to be watchin' 'em?"

Merle yawned and turned a page of the trapper's bible.

"They're gone," he said, and kept on reading.

"I can see that, blast your ignorant hide. Where'd they go?"

"Out."

Mesbit roared, "I'm gonna strangle you in a minute. What happened?"

Nesbit was standing in front of Merle's cell now, his whiskers quivering, and his teeth rattling with every screeching word. "Where's Dumpy DuFore and them danged prisoners? Where'd they go?"

Merle laid his magazine down impatiently. "They left about an hour ago."

"Dumpy and the prisoners? All together?"

"Yeah. But it wasn't Dumpy's idea. They just kinda took him along for a hostage, so if anybody got too close on them, they was going to kill him."

"How'd they escape?"

"A friend of theirs just come up and hitched his lariat to the bars and tied it on his saddle horn and yanked 'em out by their roots. They climbed out and went around front and took Dumpy. They asked me if I wanted to go along, but it's too cold out for me."

"How in the dickens did they yank them bars out without Dumpy hearin' 'em?"

"I reckon Dumpy was just sittin' around with his finger in his mouth and his mind in Arkansas. Anyhow, they got him."

The old marshal groaned. "Do you know who them hombres was?" he barked. "They was the Royce broth-

"You're nothing but a Tishomingo bird, Merle Robertson . . . Your whole mind is too busy lookin' back to where you come from. If folks don't have no respect for you, it's because you don't respect yourself . . ."

"You give me a pain right where I touch the saddle," said Nesbit.

ers. They only robbed a dozen or so banks here in Indian Territory, and killed half a dozen men. They stole probably a hundred thousand dollars all told. And by the great Galloping Gelding, you set there and tell me about them gettin' away just like it was the most unimportant thing in the world."

"To me it is the most unimportant thing in the world," Merle told him. "Now if you'll close that window so that cold air'll quit blowing in here, I'll go on and finish this article before the coal oil's all gone out of my lamp."

"You danged worthless, half-witted, no-account, overgrownhunk o' coyote bait, why didn't you yell or something?"

"Why should I holler?" Merle asked. "I don't owe Dumpy nothing except a punch in the jaw for breaking up my fight with Cooper. He laid his gunbarrel over my head and dragged me down here, didn't he?"

"If he hadn't laid his gunbarrel over your head you'd have beat Cooper to death, and then where'd you be? You'd been hangnoose meat by now."

"Cooper didn't have no right trying to cheat that widder woman that was trying to sell her dead husband's plows for enough money to get back to her parents. And Dumpy didn't have no right interfering when we was fighting about it. That cheap skunk deserved a beatin'."

"That don't make no difference," Nesbit stormed.

"Them Royces got Dumpy, and escaped. They'll sure as shootin' crack some bank around the jail while you're gone."

"You'll play whaley," Marshal Nesbit snapped. "I cain't ask nobody else to go out and help me on a night like this. You ain't no crinimal, you're just a worthless nuisance. I'm turnin' you out and deputizing you to go with me. You know every foot of them mountains—"

"Yeah, I know 'em. In fact, I know just where them hombres went. But that don't mean I'm going there with you. I'm a prisoner, not an officer."

"You aint no such thing! You're discharged from jail!" Marshal Nesbit took out his keys and unlocked Merle's cell. "And I now hereby deputize you as a deputy marshal, subject to my orders until you're undeputized. Now! That'll cure you o' the idea that you're going to lie around in a nice warm jail, while I'm out in a blizzard lookin' for men you shouldn't have allowed to escape. Git your coat on, and come on. And if you give me any trouble. I won't let you sleep in that cell any more."

THEY WENT to the Owl Cafe and filled up on hot coffee, then went to the liverystable and got horses. They ducked their heads into the storm and hit the snow-filled trail toward the mountains.

Old Nesbit said after they'd ridden a while:

"Merle, I don't understand you. I admit Dumpy ain't no great shakes at any job much, but he's a decent young feller trying to do a job helpin' keep the peace. I don't understand how you can hate him so much for throwin' you in jail."

"I don't hate Dumpy."

"Then how can you lie around and let a couple of bank-robbers take him out and kill him? I'd think any decent citizen would want to do something to help him? If you don't hate him, how come you don't want to help him?"

"It's just because I don't give a damn what happens to him one way or another. I've been throwed in jail before for fightin' and I'll probably be throwed in again. It's just a habit they've got here in Ti. What difference does it make to me who does it?"

Old Nesbit snorted. "You think we arrest you from force of habit, huh? Didn't it even enter your thick skull that it's you that's got the habit? You're always just about to beat somebody up with them fists of yours. We got to protect people."

"But you don't have to protect me from insults, do you? If you're tryin' to argue back to the beginnin' of it, then how comes it that people don't respect me like they do other people? They just take it for granted that I'm like the dirt under their feet."

THE TISHOMINGO BIRD

"I don't know that they do," Nesbit answered. "But if that's so, *may*be they don't respect you because you don't respect yourself."

"They think they're better than I am, like I was a stray yellow dog. I've known it ever since I was big enough to understand that I was just a maverick that Job Lannert picked up and raised."

"Bein' an orphan ain't no excuse for bein' a sorehead."

"It ain't that. Old Job and his wife was worthless themselves and I reckon they raised me that way."

"Job was a sick man, and didn't do very well, but that ain't any excuse for you to be worthless."

"Why ain't it? I reckon you never lived in an old shack that you could throw a dog through the cracks in the walls without touching a hair, with old opened up rusty tin lard cans picked out of the dump for windows, without enough to eat, and no schoolin' except learnin' to spell out the words in a stock remedy almanac. I know how people feel about me. Maybe you can't blame 'em much."

Old Nesbit jerked his horse's head up when the animal started to stumble on the snow. They rode on through the wind-whipped snow a while. Merle ducked his head in the face of the storm and wondered why he had permitted the old man to bully him into making this trip. His thoughts were running back over the years he had spent in Ti Valley and Ti Township. It was a bitter thing, this review of the years in which he had merely existed from day to day, trapping, fishing, doing odd jobs that nobody else wanted to do.

After a while Old Marshal Nesbit broke his silence with a long explosive oath.

"You know, Merle, you make the seat of my pants tired. You're about the most disgustin' example of a human Tishomingo bird that I ever seen."

"What do you mean?" Merle bridled up.

"Accordin' to my hearings," Marshal Nesbit said thoughtfully, "The Tishomingo bird had one bad fault."

"What was it?"

"Well, other birds all fly face forward so's they can see where they're

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

going. But this damned Tishomingo bird, he had the habit of flying backward, so he could always keep his eyes on where he came from instead of where he was going."

"You're talkin' plumb loco," Merle laughed. "I always know where I am."

"You may know where you are, but you don't know where you're going. Your whole mind is too busy lookin' back to where you come from. I bet you ain't even planned on going nowhere."

"You're crazy," was all that Merle could think of to answer. It didn't sound like much of an argument, but right now he couldn't think of anything that would prove Nesbit was wrong.

"Am I?" Nesbit asked, "Then where are you headed? What's your ambition?" Nesbit snapped the questions at him with the rapidity of fast six-gun fire.

"Maybe if I'd had different folks from Job Lannert—"

"Job Lannert wasn't your daddy. Your daddy and mother was good respectable hard-workin' people. Lannert and his wife lived down in a shack on the creek back o' your dad's place, and worked for your dad. Then your dad and mother got shot to death one day when they got in the middle of a battle with bank robbers right here in Ti. They'd left you with Mrs. Lannert, to come into town to make the last payment on a bank loan that day. There was nobody else to keep you, so the Lannerts moved onto your dad's place and went on and raised you. They might not have been any too enterprisin', but at least instead of criticizin' them, you ought to realize you owe it to them that there was somebody to even feed you and wash your didies. You give me a pain right where I touch the saddle!"

Merle Robertson felt Nesbit's words strike him with the force of a head of overflow water. He rode on through the darkness side by side with Nesbit for a long while before he spoke, and then it was with a quality of disbelief in his voice, and his question was posed more to himself than to Nesbit.

"You mean that I come from just

as good folks as anybody else around here? That I could go on and do whatever I wanted to, just the same as anybody?"

"Who's stoppin' you?" Nesbit answered. "I never heard of anybody tryin' to keep you from makin' something out of yourself. Of course, if anybody did try to stop you, I reckon you'd kind of fold up like a sleepy weed—"

"Like hell I would," Merle Robertson said. "If I start out to do something, there ain't nobody going to stop me. I reckon I'm as good as anybody around here. You say it was bankrobbers killed my folks while they were in the bank on business?"

"Yep," Nesbit answered. "Now where'd you say you heard them prisoners plannin' on holin' up?"

"I didn't say, but I'm sayin' now. It's an old trapline cabin I built at the head of Wagonwheel Creek. Hard to get to any time, and in daytime a man holed up in it could see a body approaching half a mile away. But I know how to get to it. Do you mind if you have to make a few miles afoot after we get up the mountain a piece?"

"It ain't a matter of whether I mind or not," Nesbit answered acidly. "It's my duty. I'll make it."

AFTER ANOTHER hour of riding they came to the edge of a cleared piece of the mountainside a hundred or so acres in area. Merle stopped his horse and the marshal pulled up beside him. The snow had just about quit falling now and the clearing was a long sloping table of white, at the upper end of which was a tiny yellow pinpoint of light.

"They're here, or somebody is," he said to Nesbit. "If we hit across the snow, they could see us against the white background. But we can pick up the creek over the the left and follow it up. It's wooded enough to hide us. Only thing, it'll be pretty rough from the creek to the cabin."

"Don't worry about me," Nesbit said.

It was not difficult to follow the creek up its winding course for the first half mile, but then the going got worse. The small stream up here

(Continued On Page 104)

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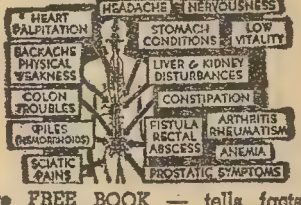

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(Continued From Page 103)

was winding around between rocks and boulders some of which were as big as a cabin.

The smooth snow was deceptive, for it leveled off the hollows and projecting rocks which tripped them time after time, or dropped them into snow pockets up to their middles. By the time they were ready to leave the stream and cut across to the cabin, hidden by the hillside field of boulders, old Marshal Nesbit was breathing loudly through his nose and his false teeth were clattering in his mouth, but he made no protest.

They were within a hundred yards of the house now, and looking down upon it from their position on the higher ground, they could see smoke coming from the mud-and-stone fireplace chimney, and narrow knife-blades of light coming from the cracks where the clay chinking had fallen out from between the log walls.

"Kinda rough getting down from here on," Merle warned the marshal. "Got to climb over stones all the way. Think you can make it?"

"I ain't turning back at this point," Nesbit said. "I came to get them men."

"Le's go, then! Over that rock!"

Nesbit stepped forward. His foot slipped, and as he tried to right himself, he got tangled in his old ankle length coonskin coat. He skidded on the sloping rock, grunted and slid over its lip.

Merle followed quickly but carefully keeping his feet. He found Nesbit lying in a heap ten feet below where he had slipped. The old man was groaning, and blood ran from his temple.

Merle picked up a handful of snow and rubbed the old man's forehead and face, reviving him somewhat. He lifted Nesbit to his feet.

One of Nesbit's legs promptly gave way under him and he sat down in the snow again.

"My knee!" he said in a low voice. "It's sprained. Won't hold my weight."

Merle looked down at the cabin, then at Nesbit speculatively. "We ain't giving up, this close to 'em," he

(Continued On Page 106)

ONE-GUN LAW

(Continued From Page 79)

whipped up his gun, and Ferber eared back the knurled hammer as the sights met his steady eyes.

TWINS Malone had gone into swift action at the drop of the hat. Perhaps the appearance of Funeral Talbot had made him forget the resolve he had made to forget the habit of a lifetime. But Malone slapped for *both* guns, and the murderous weapons leaped to his hands like flashing magic.

A terrific stuttering explosion blasted the stillness of sundown before the black hat had reached the ground. It was only that almost imperceptible stutter which told the initiated that one of the two gunfighters had shot....*second!*

Twins Malone was battered back under the impact of the heavy .45 slug. Marshal Jim Ferber swung slightly to the left as a bullet nicked his upper arm to show how close had been the decision of old Judge Colt.

Twins Malone took a backward step to catch his balance. But before his flashing foot had touched ground, his brain telegraphed an imperative message to his muscles.

Malone died on his feet with a bullet through his lawless heart. He sagged to the red dust like a worn rope, and his guns plopped down beside him, still smoking.

The law of Abilene watched and waited with his gun ready for law work. He had given Malone a chance to ride out of town, but Twins Malone had been gun-proud.

(Continued On Page 111)

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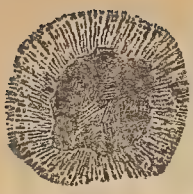

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(Continued From Page 104)

said. "Think you'll be all right here? I'll go get 'em."

"Get three armed men by yourself?" Nesbit snorted. "You couldn't get inside that door before they'd blow your insides out. You might kill one, but that'd only let the other two get away. I'm going with you if I have to crawl the whole danged distance."

Merle was looking at the cabin, hardly hearing the old man. Finally he spoke.

"Look! Here's an idea. You got some extra shells, haven't you?"

"Sure!"

"Then give them to me. I can drive those hombres out of there."

"How?"

"I'm gonna take you down there and put you behind the protection of that round breadloaf rock, where you can cover the door with your gun. Then I'm coming back and climb up those projecting poles at the corner of the cabin to the roof, and drop a handful of cartridges down that chimney to the fireplace. When they start popping, I've got an idea them Royce brothers and friend is going to want to change accommodations for the night."

"You can't do that," Marshal Nesbit said quickly. "They've got Dumpy in there with 'em, and the exploding bullets is just as likely to kill him as the robbers."

"No they won't. Here's something that a lot of people don't know about this new progressive burning powder. If you throw a bullet loaded with it in the fire it will pop a little, but it won't explode hard enough to hurt anybody. Might just sting 'em a little."

"Why?"

"Because. The idea of progressive burning powder is to make it slow burning, so it can gradually build up pressure in a gun barrel, and get all the good out of it clear to the end of the barrel. If it exploded all of a sudden like old black powder, half the force of it would be wasted. So, when you heat it slowly, it begins to give off gas slowly as it warms up, and this slow pressure kinda forces the bullet partway out of the shell and lets some of the gas leak out

around the lead before it all turns to gas. The shell just don't stay airtight long enough to build up force enough for a dangerous explosion."

"I never thought of that angle," Nesbit admitted. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

"We ain't," Merle answered. "Put your arms around my neck."

Nesbit protested, but Merled picked him up and made his way down through the treacherous boulders with the marshal on his back. His walking was noiseless in the soft snow, and he reached the round boulder out in the open in front of the door and deposited Nesbit behind it.

"Now you just keep crouched back there and cover me," he ordered. "After I plant the surprise for those boys in the fireplace, I'm going to slide down the roof and meet 'em as they come out the door. You'll be able to see me. If any of them make a break for it, you pick them off; I'll take care of those that might want to linger indoors."

MERLE left the old man in the middle of another protest, and headed around to the back of the cabin. He reached the corner and made little work of climbing to the sloping snow-covered building by way of the protruding ends of the logs which formed the walls.

He opened the box of shells he had taken from Nesbit and dropped them slowly a few at a time, down the smoking chimney. He did not drop them all at once, since he wanted them to pop continuously instead of all at once.

By the time the last shell had dropped down the flue into the roaring fire, he heard the pop of the first shell, and the rattle of the burning wood its explosion had shaken up.

"What's that?" a gruff voice barked inside the cabin, and then half a dozen shells popped intermittently like so many firecrackers on a string.

More voices roared oaths. The interior of the cabin became a babel of popping shells and profanity.

"Them's bullets flyin'!"

Merle recognized the voice of one of the Royce brothers, and grinned

(Continued On Page 108)

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You Will Bless the Day You Answered This Advertisement

(Continued From Page 107)

as he turned loose his hold on the ridge of the cabin and slid down the roof to drop into the snow beside the door.

Now there were increased yells and commotion inside the cabin, the popping of shells, and the whine of flying shell cases. He heard the table knocked over with a clattering noise.

Somebody yelled, "Lemmy out of here! Git that bar off'n the door, damn it. Quick!"

The door bar rattled and the door flew open, throwing a yellow rectangle of light from the fireplace onto the snow.

Merle stepped into the light with his pistol in his hand. The elder Royce brother was coming out, a lean, saturnine man in a great hurry to reach some place else. Two other lean dark men followed close behind him. All had their guns in their fists.

"Drop 'em, boys!" Merle snapped at them. "You ain't going anywhere right now."

"No?" Royce barked. "Who's stopping me?" He triggered his weapon.

The flame of the gun scorched the canvas of Merle's coat, and the bullet drilled his clothes and plowed a furrow along his ribs which burned him like a branding iron. It knocked him sideways and he would have fallen if his body hadn't been slammed against the cabin wall.

He steadied his gun and lifted it. But the big Royce man had seen the round rock protecting Nesbit, and like a cottontail rabbit, had made for its cover. Merle could have shot him in the back, but he left him for Nesbit and turned his gun on the second Royce.

The smaller and skinnier of the two brothers was not wasting words. His gun was swinging on Merle when Merle saw him. Their guns barked almost in unison. Merle went down in the snow with a bullet in his leg. Royce' knees buckled and he doubled up with Merle's bullet in his heart, blocking the door.

The third man wasn't for coming out and facing the music. He backed up.

Merle heard an exchange of shots out by the rock, but the man in the

room had dropped behind the overturned table, with just the top of his head and his pistol showing over its edge. The pistol was coming to bear on Merle.

With one leg useless, Merle crawled over the dead Royce and went toward the man. He barked, "Drop it!"

He saw the man's eyes tighten around the corners, and he knew this was a muscular reaction to the tightening of his nerves as he started to trigger his weapon.

Merle did not wait for any more sign. He blew the top of the man's head off just as the man squeezed his own trigger. The man's head dropped back behind the table like a shot duck in a shooting gallery.

But his slug got Merle, drilling him through the flesh between his armpit and his chest, scraping the bone and knocking him down.

The battle was over, but this time, Merle couldn't get up. The loss of blood and the shock of the three slugs he had taken had left him limp.

He looked around, saw the short Dumpy DuFore huddled in the corner beside the fireplace, his face white in the light of the fire, and perspiration running down his forehead. Dumpy's wrists and ankles were securely lashed with rawhide pigging strings. Dumpy was looking around the room with a dazed expression.

"Roll over here, Dumpy," Merle said, "Maybe I can untie you."

Dumpy seemed to recognize Merle for the first time; and at first there was a look of suspicion in his eyes.

"I said roll over here," Merle ordered him. "Let me untie you so's you can go out and get the marshal. He's out there behind a rock with a sprained knee, and he'll freeze to death if you don't get him. Hurry up, I kinda feel like I'm gonna pass out in a minute." He dug into his pocket for his knife with a hand that was fast growing weak.

Dumpy weighed matters, and came rolling over toward him. Merle was seeing him floating now. Lying on the floor, feeling his strength ebbing fast, he reached for Dumpy's wrists.

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 109)

with the knife in his hand.

He didn't remember cutting the thongs.

WHEN MERLE came to his senses he was lying in the grass filled bunk he used to sleep in when he trapped up here. Dumpy was forcing whiskey down his throat. He looked around the warm cabin, saw the burning wood in the fireplace and saw old Marshal Nesbit sitting on an upturned box, his sprained leg straight out before him on another box. He smelled boiling coffee, and saw that Dumpy had been making good use of the gunny sack of supplies the bandits had brought up with them.

But he didn't feel any too good. It was as though he had been through a long sick spell. His body ached and burned, his forehead was fevered and his lips were dry and parched.

Marshal Nesbitt was watching him take stock of himself.

"Think you'll live?" he asked.

"The way I feel now, I ain't sure I want to," Merle answered. "That Royce hombre I missed; did you get him?"

"Yep! You feel like maybe you can travel some time after daylight? We ought to get you to a doctor to look after them wounds, and put in your claim for your share of the reward money."

"No, don't bother about me. Just leave me what's left of the food and I'll stay up here a while. I been thinking of coming back here and doing some trapping, anyway."

"You ain't, either. You've got to go to town. Dumpy ain't scared after this experience, he says, but he's come to the conclusion that what he really hankers for more'n being a a deputy, is to get back to work on his old man's cattle ranch. So, it kinda looks like I won't be able to undeputize you after all. 'Course, you'll get paid regular wages, and you can sleep in the jail, if you like whenever it ain't got too many customers. Think you'd like a regular job for a change?"

Merle closed his eyes, and strange new pictures came to his mind, pictures of what the old homeplace could be made to look like with a

THE TISHOMINGO BIRD

new pine house on it—with real glass windows. And steady wages could buy a few white faced cattle...

"Say, you was saying that the old Lannert place belonged to my folks. Would that make it mine?"

"Sure, if you paid up the back taxes on it. Nobody else ever claimed it."

"Then you've got you a new deputy," he said.

He was growing weaker again, and he wanted to sleep. But he had something else to say.

"I was just wondering," he said. "What ever happened to them Tishomingo birds?"

"Oh," the sheriff grinned. "Flyin' backwards like they did, they was always bumping into trees and things, and destroying themselves. So, they're extinct now."

"I reckon they had it comin'," Merle said, and dropped off to sleep.

THE END

ONE-GUN LAW

(Continued From Page 105)

Funeral Talbot retrieved his hat and walked back into his place of business for a stretcher. Judge Tom Wilson left his court room and came to Ferber. He offered his hand gravely, and spoke with quiet satisfaction.

"We should have peace here in Abilene for a while now, Marshal. And it only took *'One-Gun Law'* to do it. I'll walk with you to Doc Brady's to get that scratch dressed proper. Just wanted to say that you're the Marshal of Abilene as long as you want the job!"

THE END

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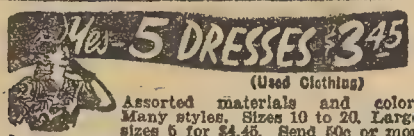

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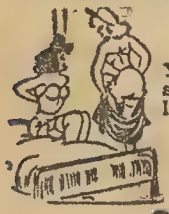

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(Continued From Page 83)

riata looped turned lazily in the air, seemed to hang motionless for a moment and then settled around the neck of the little mare.

But the fun had just started. The little mare plunged forward, jerking Juan Flaco off his feet. He bounced along like a tin can tied to a dog's tail.

But the strangling noose had its effect. The mare stopped momentarily—giving Juan Flaco enough time to scramble to his feet and snub the reata around a projecting rock.

The badly bruised and battered sailor eyed the horse for a minute or two, beginning to wonder if it wouldn't be better to walk to Monterey.

Then he took a hitch in his trousers and resolutely walked over to the snorting and rearing horse.

"Sorry, gal, but we ain't got time to get acquainted," he said as he vaulted onto the mare's back. A split-second later, Juan Flaco was picking himself up off the ground, eyeing the mare with new respect.

Once more he climbed aboard, and once more the sorrel mare proved most inhospitable.

But Juan Flaco finally outlasted the little mare, although he was unable to get the bridle on her, and was forced to guide her with the noose around her neck.

Needless to say, the trip was not a pleasant one since the little mare had her own idea as to where she wanted to go and several times took time out to do a bit of sunfishing.

Pushing the tough little mare along as fast as he could, Juan Flaco rode into Monterey late on the night of the twenty-seventh. But he was too late.

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Juan Flaco took a two hour nap and then, trading his little sorrel mare for a fresh horse, he raced on to San Francisco.

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Improved FAUCET HEATER with BUILT-IN Thermostat!

Heater has Built-in Thermostat. Aluminum Case. 6-foot Extension Cord.

Now you can know the convenience of having hot water within a few seconds without fuss or trouble . . . get the Newest development in Faucet Water Heaters. This new heater gives you continuous running hot water from cold water faucet (quantity and temperature of water depending on speed of flow of water). Yes, you regulate the quantity and temperature with your cold water faucet handle. You just attach the heater to your cold water faucet, turn on the cold tap water, plug in the current, and in seconds you've continuous running hot water . . . heated to the temperature regulated by your faucet handle. Heater is made of aluminum, is 3½" long by 2" wide and comes complete with 6-foot extension cord. Operates on 110-120 volts, AC or DC. This handy heater can be used for shaving, dishwashing, etc. Attached or detached in seconds —can be moved from room to room. Built-in thermostat cord, protected coil element; guaranteed for 1 year against mechanical defect. Heats approximately a gallon of 68° water to 140° every 3 minutes continuously.

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CONTACT

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She carries a TORCH for YOU!

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SAFELY! WITHOUT RISKING HEALTH

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